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Seventeen:
Ethics and Aesthetics

Sarah Shaw

PhD

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Seventeen:
Ethics and Aesthetics

Sarah Shaw

A thesis submitted in partial
fulfilment of the requirements of the
University of Northumbria at
Newcastle for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy

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Writing in the School of Arts and
Social Sciences

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Seventeen: Ethics and Aesthetics

My practice-led research in Creative Writing consists of composing a novel closely focalised through three members of a dual-heritage family in Suffolk in 2004 after the teenage daughter is diagnosed with leukaemia. ‘Seventeen: Ethics and Aesthetics’ explores the question: what are the tensions between truth, kindness and the form and poetics of the novel? My critical reflection considers techniques used to convince the reader, and my attempts to represent unconscious psychic processes of the novel’s protagonists in relation to trauma fiction.

The aim of the research programme has been to discover the appropriate form for a novel in which characters are paramount.

My research methodology has consisted of revising repeated drafts in order to imagine and articulate the points of view of the novel’s protagonists: Rosie, a mixed-race teenager who has a vivid sense of the ridiculous, who wants to separate herself from her family and mix with her friends; Jay, her White mother, who works in anti-racist education and has ambitions as a photographer, together with a tendency to embrace New Age ideas; and Mel, Rosie’s stepfather, who runs an independent cinema, who never intended to be anyone’s father but finds himself caught up in loving Rosie. The novel is about the language and voices used, and about how the relationships between the characters change as a result of Rosie’s illness and impending death.

Writing a commentary has informed the discipline of editing and revision. My completed critical reflection recounts decisions made on ethical or aesthetic grounds, while attempting to relate the research to cultural preoccupations in the study and composition of novels. The originality of this contribution to knowledge consists of fiction that focalises three original characters. A claim to originality may also be made in relation to my work on metaphor, metonymy and the unconscious.

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This research project was prompted not only by questions about voice and poetics, but also by the death of my daughter, Naomi Shaw, from leukaemia. I would like to thank medical and support staff at University College London Hospital, King's College Hospital and Ipswich Hospital for their kindness and expertise. I particularly want to acknowledge the high standards of nursing care in the paediatric wards where we spent time: thanks to Alex, Becky, Beverly, Bryony, Denise, Fiona, Gino, Hazel, Helen, Jan, Janice, Joy, Julie, Lee, Lesley, Libby, Lindsey, Michelle, Natalie, Sarah, Sue, Theresa, Vicky and Yvonne, among others. Special thanks and love always to Mary Sokanovic and Sarah Smith.

A poem by Naomi Shaw appears as Rosie's on p156. I have adapted a piece she wrote for English to form the setting for her hypnotherapy exercise on p68. This work is dedicated to Naomi: love you to the end of time and back.

Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Name: Sarah Shaw

Signature:

Date:

SEVENTEEN

Zero

Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?

Before I was born, in a galaxy not far from ours, on the other side of a supernova, a god was making me out of sand at the edge of an ocean. She was young, inexperienced and a bit drunk, which meant that her hand slipped and she didn't get me quite right. But everything was already in motion so I shot out of the exploding star and floated like a seed on my parachute of light across this galaxy, through a huge cloud of icy comets into our solar system and down past Pluto, Uranus and Jupiter (Neptune, Saturn and Mars being at the opposite curve of their orbits at the time). Down into Earth's atmosphere, towards the island shaped like a man wearing an oversized hat while riding a pig, and into the man's shoulder and my mother's belly in Middlesbrough, which is where we lived when I was born. Which is why children write their names and addresses like we do, for example Rose Star Ord, 46 Brook Road, Ipswich, Suffolk, England, United Kingdom, Europe, The World, The Solar System, The Milky Way, The Universe. Because our journey through emptiness and starlight has rubbed off on us.

Where did the me enter in? Out of the dark into the dark where my mother's egg, fertilised by my biological father, drifted along the fallopian tube. My cells multiplied for six days until in the womb the embryo that would become me attached itself to the snug lining in the safe golden waters. I swam and danced and grew there without any difference between myself and my mother. I swung from my cord like a trapeze artist in the dark and the scent of blood and the waters of Zion.

The darkroom is sweltering because Jay fixed cardboard over the window to reinforce the blackout curtains. She leaves the door open and turns on the bath tap to rinse her prints. The developer and fix she tips down the toilet, she opens the bathroom window to dispel the stink.

She's downstairs washing dishes when Rosie arrives home.

'How was your day? You've caught the sun.' Rosie hardly ever burns.
'Give me your lunch box while I'm washing up.'

'Er...' Rosie starts to dig through her bag. 'Sorry, Mum, I left it at school.'

Let it go. Breathe. It's only a lunch box. But if she doesn't say anything then Rosie will spend her life forgetting things, at school and later at work, and when she has kids herself, and it will be entirely Jay's fault.

'You're fifteen for God's sake, not five! You should be able to remember a simple thing like bringing your lunch box home at the end of the week. You don't want me to ring school to ask them to remind you.'

Jay can hear herself ranting, which will only alienate Rosie, but she can't stop. All the times Rosie's forgotten her PE bag or her homework, or lost her phone, her winter coat or her shoes—how in the name of fuckery do you lose your shoes?—pile up and spill out to corrode the afternoon. At least Jay doesn't say fuckery like a teenager herself, only to have Rosie remind her that although it's OK to swear, you shouldn't swear at another person unless they're physically attacking you.

'You've got to come straight home on Monday and every day till you remember your lunch box.'

Rosie clamps her lips together and stares past Jay's left ear.

'OK?'

'Yes.'

'It's just that it's going to be like a proscribed biological weapon by Monday if there's leftovers.'

‘Mum,’ Rosie meets her eyes. ‘Doctors don’t prescribe biological weapons. I’m gonna make a start on my homework so I can go to the movies tonight and laze around all weekend.’

Jay has overcooked the broccoli when the phone rings, she signals Rosie to say she’s not in. But Rosie passes her the receiver. ‘It’s Dr Fielding.’

‘Oh, hi...’

‘Tony Fielding here. Is that Mrs Ord?’

Ms Ord. ‘Yes, but call me Jay.’ She tucks the cordless phone between her jaw and her shoulder and stuffs a heap of papers into a drawer as a temporary measure.

‘You left a message asking us to reschedule Rosie’s appointment.’

‘Now she’s studying for GCSEs, even though it’s only mocks this year, she doesn’t want to miss school. If we could rearrange it for the end of May, that’s only a couple of weeks.’

‘The thing is, we’d really like to see Rosie as soon as possible, so if you could bring her to clinic on Wednesday—’

‘Dr Fielding, Tony, I’m trying to do what’s best for Rosie. She wants to lead a normal life and do well at school—’ She forks a piece of chicken into a bowl and divides the rest between three plates.

‘There was an anomaly in Rosie’s last bone marrow. I mean—’

‘I understand what anomaly means. The one from Cambridge?’

‘The lab at Addenbrookes, yes. Is that in Cambridge? We need to repeat the biopsy, to check the results.’

She spoons rice. She has to be assertive, repeat herself calmly and stand up for her daughter. After the appointment letter arrived, Rosie said she didn’t want to take time off school, besides which Jay has work on Wednesday.

‘Surely they can do that in a few weeks, at the end of May? It would be better for Rosie.’

‘We’re worried she might have leukaemia.’ He sounds simultaneously apologetic and exasperated.

‘I see. What time do we need to be there? If we travel before nine it’s really expensive.’

‘Can you get here for eleven? With Rosie nil by mouth for twelve hours.’

‘OK, Wednesday.’

She intends to be assertive but she pushes it too far, which is why neither Rosie nor Mel will ever wrestle with her or fence with sticks, because she ends up hurting them. He didn't want to say leukaemia but she wouldn't back down. It's such a terrible feeling that she refuses to share it with her loved ones, her family, because her hugest desire is to protect them. Last year when they were on holiday, she can remember it clearly, or maybe she recognises it in the photo Siouxi took, of Jay and Mel sitting in the restaurant with the blue plastic tarpaulin that overlooked the harbour, Mel told her she looked like the actor who played the character who boiled the bunny in that movie where the husband's weekend affair has unwanted effects, either because Jay's hair had gone curly with seawater or because Mel didn't like it blond, but really because he was bored with her, or because he wanted to go to bed with someone else, or because Jay was turning fifty, or because she was trying to make space for her own feelings rather than prioritising his. He said she looked like the psycho who destroyed the family, while all she was doing was trying to keep her family together and protect herself at the same time but she couldn't say anything because for one he told her not to, and for a second reason you can't get hypersensitive about every little thing somebody says when it's only a joke after all. She saved that photo in the album but she hates it because Mel is smiling at the camera while she has her arm around him and is grinning at him with an extremely anxious expression in her eyes. She can remember lying in bed with him in the villa after they made love, when he said, I think I'm going to split up with you but don't say anything to anybody because it would ruin their holiday. What about Jay's holiday? Let go. Breathe. The tide has swept that away. It's probably a mistake. Rosie doesn't have leukaemia. After all everything works out in the end, and even though Mel did split up with Jay they're back together now. And even though Rosie was a mistake because Jay was too drunk and stoned to use a condom, loving her is the best thing ever.

She's replaced the phone on the charger and she finds herself sitting down to eat.

'Pass me your planner, babes. We're going to Great Ormond Street on Wednesday because they want to redo that bone marrow in their labs, because the results weren't clear.'

She won't say anything else yet. She'll say something to Rosie on Wednesday morning, on the train, so that Dr Fielding won't spring it on her out of the blue. She'll say, The reason they want to repeat your bone marrow is because they're worried there might be something wrong with your immune system, rather than something wrong with the test. Although not on the train, where Rosie might be embarrassed by people listening. They can't be sure. He only said it because Jay was refusing to bring Rosie next Wednesday. Leukaemia. Stop thinking about it. Rosie is fine, Jay and Mel are together, Jay has a job and time to work on her photographs. The back door is open onto a garden alive with birds learning to fly, under the house next door hedgehogs are waking, soon they'll shuffle with their babies through holes in the fence to feast on Jay's slugs. Where she pulled the curtain across, the light is the colour of dandelions.

Rosie feels sorry for the little kids in the waiting room at Great Ormond Street. A boy runs round the edges of the soft play area, pretends he's been shot and falls down onto the blue plastic in the middle clutching his belly and yelling, 'Splash!' He seems fine but she knows he must have to deal with something terrible or he wouldn't be here, unless it's his brother or sister.

She leans against her mother. 'I want to do Psychology A level, except it's really cruel when they do those experiments.'

'When they make people treat each other badly?'

'No, like on animals. Miss Younger told us about one where they took baby monkeys away from their mothers and put them in a cage with a wire mother that gave food and a cloth mother that didn't provide any food. All the baby monkeys got attached to the mother they could cuddle, even though people thought feeding was the basis for the mother-infant bond. Some of the monkeys they put with only a wire mother, and when those monkeys had babies they didn't know how to look after them. But if one of them had a second baby, she looked after it all right. She learned how to be a mother from her baby.'

'I'm exactly like that. I learned how to be a mother from you.' Her mother rubs her cheek against Rosie's hair.

Rosie can totally believe it. Really her mother was irresponsible to have a baby who wasn't black or white and didn't have a proper father. She always seems to be making it up as she goes along, as though everything just happens to her and she can't make plans like getting married or stopping smoking before she had a baby. Children whose parents smoke are more likely to suffer later on from illnesses that need hospital treatment. Rosie learned that at the age of fourteen studying Child Development. How could her mother not know?

A nurse calls them through. The anaesthetist listens to Rosie's chest because of her cold. It takes two goes to get a cannula into a vein. The woman flushes some water through and then a tube of thick white cream, which stings. She sees herself escaping out into the rain, the shiny streets and red double-decker buses. Run, run like the wind! She'll get a loft apartment and share it with Megs or Feebs and never have to go to hospital again.

Her mother holds her hand as the anaesthetic goes in and says, 'Dream about camping at Bungay and jumping in the water,' which is kind of naff but also comforting.

The anaesthetist says, 'I tell the little ones to count up to ten, but you're old enough to count backwards from a hundred.'

One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight...

Dr Fielding is the expert on Kostmann's Syndrome, which is so rare that there's only one expert in the country as far as Rosie knows. He's in between young and old and his office has shelves with books and files but not posters like Mel's office or photos of children like Dr Stuart's.

He looks at her and then his eyes flicker away like he's looking at something over her shoulder, like he feels uncomfortable. He leans back in his swivel chair and says, 'I'm afraid your bone marrow today confirms that you are getting leukaemia.'

What fresh hell is this? Her mother said something this morning but Rosie can't believe it. It's not fair. Leukaemia is cancer of the blood. It can't be true. Cancer. She has been shot in the belly. She is mortally wounded. She clutches her stomach and falls into deep water. She's drowning.

‘We want to look for a match for a bone marrow transplant straight away. That means we would destroy your unhealthy bone marrow and give you some healthy bone marrow to replace it. Have you got any brothers or sisters?’

‘No, there’s just me.’

Her mother is holding her hand.

‘You know about genetic inheritance?’

Rosie nods. ‘We did it in Child Development.’

‘The closer the match, the more chance of success. We try to match ten proteins so that your body won’t resist the donor cells and they won’t attack your body. We’ll get your tissue typing done today. We’ll see how close a match your mum is. If she’s not close at all, we’ll try your dad.’

Rosie nearly says, My dad won’t be a match because I haven’t inherited anything from him. She doesn’t want her mother’s bone marrow, or Isaac’s. She’s only just managed to start to find out who she is, separate from them, and get comfortable with herself. Like you’re born with your mother’s cells and your father’s and you eat the food your parents give you, listen to their music, etcetera etcetera, even if your father isn’t your birth father. When you get old enough to decide for yourself, you begin to see how stupidly they behave and you actually want to get away from all that. And when you feel a bit safer with who you are, you still need to maintain a bit of distance so they respect your selfness.

R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

He tells her to stop her injections. He says she can’t have her transplant at Great Ormond Street because they never take anybody over twelve, but he hopes they can find a place in an adolescent treatment centre so Rosie will be with teenagers rather than old people. When he asks if she has any questions, she wants to ask whether all her hair is going to fall out. Except he’ll think she’s really vain and shallow.

The nurse specialist takes them to another hospital, where they meet a transplant consultant who’s young and friendly, not like a headmaster or consultants who know it all. She is wearing beautiful shoes with four-inch heels and she talks to Rosie, not to her mother like some doctors. Her office is totally bare apart from the computer on the desk and one shelf that has books on. The other shelves are empty. She says, ‘Call me Eddie.’

Eddie sounds like a boy's name. Actually, so does Jay, except Jay's name was Mary Jennifer before she got everyone to call her Jay. She said she always wanted a name that could be either, and she thought about calling Rosie Charlie, Jude or Sam, but when she saw her she couldn't help naming her Rose Star. Some people say Mel sounds like a girl's name and in fact his name is Arnold Melville but he refuses to be called Arnold or Arnie.

'Tell me about what's happened.' Eddie smiles and sits still and looks as though she really wants to know.

'When I was a baby, they found out I've got something called Kostmann's Syndrome, which means my bone marrow doesn't produce the cells that fight off bacterial infection. So when I was two, I nearly died. I couldn't breathe so I had to have a tracky thingy, that's right, tracheotomy.'

Rosie lifts her chin and points to her scar. She knows it looks like an angel flying down her neck, with wings and a halo where big stitches held the tube in place, even though she only ever sees it back to front in the mirror.

Eddie leans forward and really listens.

'After that I used to have to go into hospital and have antibiotics if I got an infection. When I was about eight or nine I got ill a lot, so I started having injections. I'd give myself injections every day, it's called GCSF, to make my bone marrow produce the white cells... neutrophils, they're called?'

The consultant nods. 'That's right. You're obviously an intelligent young woman.'

'And then lately I've been really well, not like the levels in my blood have gone up but I've only had to have injections twice a week. But now I'm getting leukaemia, and because it's in transition the only good way to treat me is a bone marrow transplant.' Again she feels like crying, except she doesn't want to show herself up.

Eddie says they have to come back soon to look round the adolescent unit. Plus Rosie needs scans and tests.

She clutches her mother's arm as they head for home because everything has rushed into a blur. Cancer. Suppose she dies? Will it be painful? People will hold black umbrellas in the cemetery in the rain and tears will run down everybody's cheeks. Her life was getting to be all right for a change, like her relationship with her parents has been better and she has friends who actually

treat her nicely and she hasn't been seriously ill. She's been having a laugh: on Friday she and Megs and Feebs and Barbie loitered in the classroom at the end of school and turned the clock back half an hour, and then on Monday they all turned up late on purpose so Mr Fag-Ash went ballistic but when he said, Look at the time! everybody cracked up because the clock showed half past eight. But now it's all gone crap again.

From the top of the bus, she notices a sale at Warehouse near Liverpool Street. She nudges her mother and points.

Her mother presses the bell to stop the bus. 'You need to know you deserve nice things, not only horror.'

Rosie gives her a look before she stands up. She wants to make sure her mother doesn't talk about leukaemia in front of everybody. She doesn't want her mother to cry because she cried every day after Mel split up with her. Little children cry but mothers should be strong. She doesn't want people to be upset because that will make her feel worse. How can she tell her friends? Maybe she should keep it a secret.

They get off the bus and Rosie links elbows with her mother so she won't lose her. A woman with a baby, with dark skin, a thin nose and a scarf round her head, holds out her hand and says, 'Please. Thank you.'

Rosie's mother drops a pound coin into her hand.

'Mum, give her more than that. She's got a baby.'

In the shop Rosie cradles her left hand against her chest to protect it while she flicks through hangers of city shorts, slashed nylon tops with sequinned necks and peasant blouses. Nothing good on the Sale racks but she tries on a floaty green top that's fitted at the bust, skims her tummy and has wide, pointed sleeves.

'It looks really great,' says her mother.

'It's too expensive.'

'No, give it to me. I'll pay while you get dressed.'

As soon as Bonita gets tired of Joe and dumps him, Rosie will wear this top to Liquid.

'Are you going to tell Mel?' she asks as they walk to the station.

'D'you want me to?'

'Yes. If you don't mind.'

‘I’ll tell him, but not on the phone. If you love somebody you need to tell them serious news face to face, so you can hold their hand and give them a hug.’

Her mother buys Rosie an American Hot from Pizza Express to eat on the train. While they wait for the pizza she gets herself some little cartons of curry, awful stuff like chickpeas and cauliflower, called Tiffin Boxes. The train smells worse than the boys’ changing room, even through Rosie’s cold. It’s crammed with people in suits that stink like wet dogs. They are gabbing on their phones or typing on their laptops as though they’re incredibly important and grumpy.

Her mother asks, ‘Is anyone sitting here?’

The man moves his coat and the woman opposite shifts her briefcase. Rosie puts her Warehouse bag in the rack. They haven’t got a table. Her mother smiles and passes Rosie a wipe. She looks somehow human in her long-sleeved T-shirt and long cardie, out of place among the suits, like they aren’t anybody’s mother or father but spend their lives with hard, electronic things that make them look hassled.

The smell of cheese, tomato and pepperoni spreads from Rosie’s pizza box. She tries to eat surreptitiously. She tries to chew properly before she swallows so her stomach won’t hurt but it’s difficult when your nose is blocked. Dr Fielding said stomach ache isn’t a recognised symptom of leukaemia but everybody is different and Rosie’s case is unique.

Her mother puts her bag flat on her lap with her carrier of food on top. She opens a pot of veggie curry. When she jerks the lid off her rice she knocks the other pot over so that yellow gunk goes everywhere, onto her skirt and cardie, into her bag, onto the floor, even a bit on the newspaper of the man sitting next to her.

‘God, sorry!’

Her mother wipes his paper first. She starts to pinch chickpeas off her clothes into paper napkins and drop them back in her carrier. Then she looks at Rosie with a guilty look. They’re both trying to avoid catching the eye of anybody else in the carriage and they crack up. Rosie’s mother is covered in curry sauce and Rosie has leukaemia and it’s all horrific but they can’t do anything about it. And then they’re both helpless with giggles and it feels wonderful.

Mel cycles along the Cornmarket, avoiding pedestrians. Most of the shop windows could be anywhere in Britain but the floors above jut black and white, half-timbered or adorned with fabulous stone faces, scrolls and ferns. I really want you to come round for an hour today, she said on the phone. I can't wait till tomorrow. Maybe she's devised an enticing assignation. He's had a shit day so far.

It's not a sacking offence; it shouldn't even be a matter for disciplinary action, except that his boss is such a pompous loser. Mel was already beginning to think he'd be lucky to keep his job now the Tories have a majority on the Borough Council. Lonnie's a sports fanatic, while Ellen Pipe is salivating to hack the Film House into bleeding gobbets with the Tory chainsaw and feed it to the wolves so she can increase support for dance and theatre. If they offer him redundancy he could take the money and set up as a private eye. Private dick. What his penis gets up to remains private, nothing to do with anyone else. He's intelligent and keeps a cool head in a crisis. Only he wouldn't be gazing out at the bayou slurping an iced Dr Pepper with his nine-millimetre Beretta wrapped in a towel. Or solving a murder with index cards in the converted single-car garage he rents from his octogenarian landlord. He'd have to locate missing pets, reassure suspicious wives and trace birth parents. Instead of the femmes fatales and ceiling fans of Bogart movies, he'd be dealing with bureaucracy and endless emails: same old same old. He sees himself in black and white, lit from the side: Spencer Tracy. The insanely subjective camera of *The Lady in the Lake* has to be wrong, because people in real life see themselves living their lives. Mel notices a van signalling right, a gap in traffic into which to insert the bike, the art-deco Odeon building on the corner, but he also sees himself keeping fit instead of driving, his beige chinos tucked into clips at the ankles. Not reflected in a window but in his mind, photoshopping his own image from shaving and holiday snaps. Which must be one reason the majority of people aren't more outraged about attacks on civil liberties threatened by surveillance cameras everywhere.

The air feels fresh after the storm. He indicates and moves into the right-hand lane after the Caribbean Association. He can't believe he lost the staff rotas. At least he's got the brochure copy on his Mac at home and he'd already

saved the box-office returns. Forget about it. The patch of dry skin on his wrist itches. His groin itches where the stubble's growing through.

He pumps his legs harder as he reaches the hill. He won't lie to Jay. He'll tell her if she asks, but if she doesn't it would be pointless to worry her, because there's nothing between him and Cara any more. I went out with a colleague, he'll say if Jay asks, which is true because Cara taught a course on film art. Jay goes out with her women friends, so why shouldn't Mel? A relationship with one woman doesn't have to mean he should never go for a drink with another who's a friend or colleague. Jay doesn't want that kind of suffocation any more than he does.

He cycles under the railway viaduct and turns left, and then right into Brook Road. He hates the diamond-paned front windows of Jay's terraced house because they're fake leaded, fake Tudor, and fakery is anathema to him. He lets himself in and calls out, 'All right if I bring the bike in?'

Jay's wearing a long skirt and a sleeveless shirt with no makeup: hardly a seductress look.

'Not at work today, love?' Mel asks.

'I took yesterday off in lieu. Cup of tea?'

'I can't stop long. I've got a pile of work to get through.'

She looks serious. She couldn't possibly know about last night. Anyway, nothing happened. He went home on his own. What happened is this morning he lost the staff rotas when his computer froze before he got round to saving them on the intranet, and his line manager gave him a hard time. He'll tell Jay about that.

She makes him a mug of tea. She looks at him, and heaves a massive sigh.

'Rosie's bone marrow aspiration shows that she has acute myeloid leukaemia in transition from Kostmann's Syndrome. She needs a bone marrow transplant.'

She reaches across and holds his hand. It feels as if he's been thumped in the breastbone. His chest aches where a bruise is forming. Acute myeloid leukaemia. Leukaemia is cancer of the white blood cells. Obscenity.

She stands and he clasps his arms around her waist and nestles his head against her ribs. He doesn't know what to say. He's dying for a smoke.

‘What’s myeloid leukaemia? Come outside, while I have a cigarette.’

How can it be sunny? The Triffid vine that smothers her garden fence has started to send out tendrils. She tips a couple of chairs for them to sit down.

‘Are they sure?’ he asks.

‘Yeah, practically. They’ve already begun to look for a match for a bone marrow transplant. Because she’s in transition from a previous condition, they don’t want to try other treatments.’

‘I wish she was here. I want to give her a hug.’

The table’s still wet. He flattens a cigarette paper on the lid of his tin. He can feel a lump in his throat; when he swallows, the lump hurts his bruised chest. He spreads tobacco, adds a filter and rolls the cigarette. They were up all night when Rosa was born. She shot into the room, not how he would have imagined. If the midwife hadn’t caught her she would have bounced out to the end of the cord, like that game Siouxsie used to have in the garden with a tennis ball attached to elastic. Rosa was all blue and yellow and red with blood and vernix. When he touched his finger against her palm, she clutched it with astonishing strength. He was the first person to hold her hand. Because she had dark blue eyes and her hair was straight with a reddish tinge, he thought for a few weeks that Jay might have made a mistake and she was his after all, not Isaac’s. She had perfect miniature fingernails and toenails.

‘She was doing so well,’ he says.

He rests his cigarette on the tin and tugs Jay out of her chair. He folds her into a hug. He was grateful she never hassled him to do more when Rosa was a baby. Jay chose Rose on her birth certificate but Mel called her Rosa after the Polish communist Rosa Luxemburg: better a strong, smart woman than a flower. Her hair fell out and grew back curly and black, her irises turned dark brown and her skin changed from red to tan, so he knew she was Isaac’s. It was Rosa herself who transformed him into a father, after Jay moved with her to Ipswich and she started school. Can I call you Dad? she asked. Maybe because most of the other kids had fathers as well as mothers. He was reading her a bedtime story, snuggled up with her against the pillows. Her hair smelled of the leave-in conditioner from the pink bottle. Can I call you Dad? He didn’t know what to say. He had to say something. It felt as if his air line had snagged on a rock or a rusty anchor. I know Isaac is my dad in Middlesbrough, but he doesn’t cook me

Sunday dinner or read me stories. She felt so skinny and insubstantial against his arm. She was so trusting. Of course you can call me Dad. I'd be honoured to be your dad. He was grateful it was Jay who had to make decisions about her treatment.

He kisses Jay on the lips.

'I think I'm coming down with Rosie's cold,' she says.

'Never mind.'

He takes her to bed, to distract her from worry. Work can wait another hour. Her bedroom is the only room in the house that doesn't have her photos in frames on the walls. She shuts the curtains and lies down beside him.

'I'm your stud puppet. Tell me what you want me to do.'

She reels off a list.

'Have you been planning?' He kisses the tip of her nose.

'I've been daydreaming.'

'I'm glad you still daydream about sex with me, after sixteen years. Not just holidays in the rain.'

'If you had to choose between a sub-aqua diving holiday and a muff-diving holiday, which would you pick?'

He laughs and shuts her up with a kiss. He begins with the boring items, to get them over and done with: stroke her hair and flutter butterfly kisses against her cheeks with his eyelashes. It's warm enough to flip the duvet back. The light through the curtains makes the pale skin of her belly look blue. He rolls her onto one side, lifts her hair out of the way and nibbles the nape of her neck. Her nipple hardens against his right palm. He slides his other hand to press her left breast. Spooning her, he feels his penis stiffen against her buttocks. She wriggles.

'Not now.' He pretends sternness.

He eases her onto her back and parts her legs. She doesn't shave or trim her pubes and the lips of her vulva are longer and darker than Cara's. When she was studying for an MA, Jay told him about reading an anthropological account transcribed from the words of a Kung! woman. She said, I don't know how to pronounce it but it has an exclamation mark. Europeans called them Bushmen. The Kung! people value women's genitalia equally to men's; the length of a woman's labia is as prized as the size of a man's penis, she said. What Mel finds

attractive are neither long labia nor short pink neat ones but Jay's confidence in relation to the tyranny of norms, which means she would never in a million years have her vulva surgically trimmed.

She's already wet. She tastes like the sea. When he slides a finger inside, her vagina encloses it as a sea anemone grips his finger when he explores a rock pool. He wants to lick her until she comes. But even though she's shuddering and moaning she shifts his head away, sits up and says, 'Your turn.'

She makes him lie down and squats over him to moisten his glans with her vaginal juices. She laps at his balls with the tip of her tongue and then uses its whole surface to lick his erection as if it were a melting ice cream. She grips his penis with both hands to slide his foreskin back and forth while her hot mouth still encloses his glans. His penis feels enormous and he's about to come and he loses himself.

One

When I am a baby, before I know reading and writing or walking and running or the difference between me and you, I have two mothers. One is an angel with a soft voice and breasts that are always warm and sweet and full. She feeds me sweet creamy milk, bathes me in pools of shining water and rocks me to sleep on the swell of her breath while I pat her locket and play with her soft hair. I am a good girl, I am a good girl, I am a good girl. I talk back to her. Even though I don't know the words, what I say is exactly as sweet and musical as the songs she sings about lambs and stars and roses. In my dreams I run exactly as well as she can run. I lift her in my arms and swirl her round, laughing, exactly as she twirls me.

But up from hell arrives another mother, who at first seems the same as the one I know. In the dark the hell mother changes into a snake that hisses. The other mother carries me to a strange land where she forsakes me among strangers. The other mother turns the first mother's milk so bitter I can't drink.

Sometimes the sweet mother comes to rescue me. Other times the snake mother holds me down and tortures my back with spikes. There is no difference between me and the sweet mother, no difference between me and the snake mother. I believe that what happens to me happens to all babies. It is what I deserve. This is what it means to be a baby: to have a sweet mother and a snake mother; to suck sweet milk, and to suffer agony.

Rosie hasn't told her friends yet. Because any sign of weakness can change you into the kind of person people make that L at, the one with the palm of their hand vertical and their thumb stuck sideways that means Loser and the only texts they get say Fat slag and they never get invited anywhere. Anything could get you sent to Loser hell, like being fat or smelly or nervous even though it's not as bad as it was a couple of years ago when wearing the wrong trainers or having the wrong phone meant nobody cool would even speak to you. L for Loser, L for leukaemia. In Year Four at primary school, because she had to stay in hospital a lot she got left out of skipping, so now she reckons having leukaemia might get her excluded from nights out at Liquid or the Pool Club.

The paediatric oncology nurse, which means children's cancer nurse, says Rosie needs to tell them. Rosie's seen her before at Ipswich Hospital and her name is Martha. She's about the same age as Rosie's mother. She has a massive bazooma shelf that she could rest her biscuit on if she needed both hands for her mug of tea. She's talking to Rosie in the back garden. Reggae floats out of the kitchen window. Her mother is making pizza from scratch. Rosie can hear her singing along to a happy song.

Martha says, 'I can tell them for you if it's difficult. You could let me know who to invite and I can arrange a meeting at school.'

'I want to tell them myself. If somebody else tells them, I'd feel more like I've got no control.'

Martha says Rosie's friends need to keep on including her. They need to keep inviting her even if she misses events because she's ill and they need to visit her when she's in hospital. She really sounds like she knows what she's talking about.

Rosie decides to tell Megs, Feebs and Barbie straight away. Next day after they eat their lunch on the hill-thing overlooking the football field she sets out to tell them but it turns out to be more difficult than she expected. She ends up asking, 'What d'you call this thing, anyway?'

‘What thing?’ Feebs is sitting with her arms round her knees.

‘This hill thingy?’

‘Is it a dyke?’

‘No way.’ Barbie’s lying on her tummy with her feet in the air. ‘I’m not gonna say, I spent my lunch break lying on the dyke.’

Rosie can feel herself and Feebs carefully not looking at Megs, who’s lying at the other end of the row with Barbie and Feebs in the middle, which is typical, like Megs and Rosie are the outsiders and Feebs and Barbie are the core. Barbie isn’t even her real name but they have to call her that, in revenge for her dominance maybe, like on the telly where Barbie is the dominant meerkat or lioness or whatever.

‘Shut up, you retard. I think it’s a ridge,’ says Feebs.

‘It’s a Hungarian Ridgeback. We spent our lunch break sitting on the Hungarian Ridgeback. Anyway, I was only trying to change the subject because I have something tragic to tell you, my little maties.’

Rosie rubs the smooth surface of her locket between her thumb and fingers. It feels warm from the sun and her skin. She can tell them because they are her friends.

‘What? You can’t come to Tom’s party?’ says Megs.

‘Not that, no. As planned, a meeting will take place between my mother and Feebs’ mum. And as it turns out my mum just thought, all-night party! She didn’t even realise it’s Tom’s party who she’s known since I was four, with all people from school, so she’s not panicking so much.’

Exactly underneath where they’re sitting at the edge of the football field a little Year Seven kid tackles another one who falls, clutches his arm and starts yelling. Rosie’s about to get up and ask if he’s all right when Aaron from their tutor-group jogs across to sort him out.

‘Anyways, amigas, I really need to tell you—’

‘What? Bonita split up with Joe? I knew that!’ Megs says.

‘For god’s sake! You know when I had the day off to go to hospital in London? You know I have to have my injections? Well, it turns out I’m getting leukaemia.’

Feebs goes, ‘You’re joking. You are joking?’

‘Crap, isn’t it?’

Megs starts to cry, not noisily but tears spill down her cheeks.

Barbie says, 'Fuck, no!'

Feebs shuffles on her bottom till she's next to where Rosie is sitting cross-legged in a posture of Zen wisdom and calm and puts her arms round her. Barbie gets up to join in so enthusiastically that she knocks Feebs and Rosie over and falls and squashes them under her superheroine muscles and curves. And then Megs piles on top until they're all crying and laughing and heaving around in a heap.

Rosie explains to them what Martha told her. In fact she takes her rough book out of her bag and shows them the diagram Martha drew of a thighbone.

'Bone marrow is incredibly clever. It knows how to make red blood cells to carry oxygen when it gets messages from your kidneys. Or white cells to fight infection when your body sends an invasion alert.' Rosie pictures a phone ringing with a flashing light in the president's office in the White House, or maybe natives lighting beacon fires on a headland like in some old movie. Help, the Vikings have landed! 'I already knew about white cells that munch bacteria and get expelled from your body as pus, which is gross.'

'Yeah, gross,' says Barbie.

'Yeah, well you get pus, I don't. Because my bone marrow's never made enough neutrophils, which are the white cells. If you were doing a leaflet about the immune system, you'd draw the bacteria as spiky blobs with sharp teeth.' Rosie starts to draw one. 'They'd be carrying weapons, and the white cells would have big eyes and smiles and rounded edges, as well as massive muscles to show how strong they are.'

'Grrr, go the bacteria, Kill, kill,' says Megs.

'I'm gonna git you, suckers. That's a white cell.' Feebs grabs the book and draws a big bubble-writing C swallowing a gang of armed-to-the-teeth bacteria.

'Anyhow, my bone marrow has gone into overdrive producing white cells that are immature and ineffective.'

Rosie's neutrophils have big eyes but skinny little arms and legs. They're cringing and crying, not smiling. She feels sorry for them.

By the day of the party it's like everybody has found out she has leukaemia. Which is hardly surprising because she and her mother did an interview for the paper to get people to register as bone marrow donors. Rosie liked the reporter because he didn't put on a special solemn voice when he asked stuff like, 'Is it a life-and-death situation?' He didn't look at Rosie with a sorrowful expression. And when Rosie's mother told him that a black or mixed-race person who needed a transplant used to have a one-in-two-hundred-and-fifty-thousandth chance compared with about one in five for a white person, not so long ago, before the African Caribbean Leukaemia Thingy was set up, he said, 'Bloody hell.'

Anyway, it seems like everybody knows and some people are nice about it. Like Tom, who gives Rosie such a big hug she says, 'Let go, you're cracking my ribs.'

He says, 'Word up, Ro-Ro, you are the ultimate star and will come through no trouble, mate.'

Other people are weird and give her a sorrowful smile every time they see her, like Mrs Winsome, or totally avoid having to speak to her at all.

Rosie wears her floaty green top over jeans. She's actually thin for once so you can see her cheekbones. Even if it's because she has cancer, she has to make the most of the advantages as well as enduring the absolute crap. She and Feebs and Megs and Barbie get a taxi out along the Felixstowe Road with money from their aged parents, who have made them promise to stay together so if one person wants to leave they all leave or if one of them wants to stay they all have to stay, which hardly makes sense and could result in warfare if you think about it. And to ring if anything goes wrong whatever hour of the night and not to get too drunk etcetera etcetera.

Tom's father's house is unusually big but the best thing about it is the huge garden that's mostly grass. Also a paddock, which is a small field with two horses. Because it's a detached house Tom can put music on loud without upsetting the neighbours. At first they lie in the paddock but a horse comes over and nuzzles them so they climb back over the fence into the garden and watch the sun go down behind Sainsbury's.

Joe is there and when Rosie tells him her insane George Bush quotations, Feebs doesn't even say, 'You got that one from me.'

Joe laughs and Rosie gets the impression he likes the fish one best. But his eyes are kind of sad when he looks at her, which hurts her stomach. The grass smells damp and wonderful. He tickles Rosie's cheek with a stalk that has seeds on the end while she enjoys being close enough to touch him, which is to say she wants to touch him but she doesn't. Talk about cheekbones. She can't believe it when he actually leans forward and everything goes slow motion and he's looking in her eyes and his face gets closer so she can see a few short hairs inside his skin where he's shaved. He kisses her on the cheek and she wonders if she's gone red. He moves away and answers something somebody said and laughs. Her cheek tingles. She's not going to wash it, ever.

It gets a lot colder as the sun sets and the air is full of biting midgy things so they all go inside.

Tom's dad arrives back from the pub and orders about seven pizzas. Two of them have pepperoni but Rosie isn't hungry and her tongue hurts. One minute she's shivering. The next second she feels hotter than pizza in a pizza oven. The only good thing is that when Bonita walks in, Joe doesn't even look at her. It's like Rosie has extra eyes or antennae or something that make her know where Joe is every second and who he's talking to even though she's careful not to keep staring at him. She doesn't feel right. Her head aches and she has to sit down on a sofa in the kitchen.

'Maybe you've drunk too much.' Feebs feels Rosie's forehead with her palm. 'Oh my God, you are so hot!'

'I wish Joe would say that. I've only had two Breezers. One and a half, actually. In fact I'm thirsty. Por favor, amiga, get me some Fanta naranja.'

When Feebs went to Spain with them at Easter that's what she and Rosie drank all the time.

'Listen, d'you want to go home?'

Rosie can't help checking her idea of what the others want to do, as if they are four legs of a zebra that all have to move together rather than four separate zebras. What's she on about, zebras? Last time she saw Barbie, Barbie was dancing in the front room like a mating bird on happy pills. Megs is tidying pizza boxes while Tom lurches around drunk and occasionally grabs her for a snog.

'No!'

She's still hoping for Joe to go outside for a breath of fresh air. Rosie will be sitting on the terrace wall in the moonlight and Joe will sit down beside her and stretch out his arms. He'll yawn and then tuck one arm around Rosie's shoulders and lean close and kiss her again, on the mouth this time.

Feebs hands her a paper cup of fizzy orange.

'Tom's really drunk and I don't want to ask his dad. I'm gonna investigate the bathroom cupboard and see if they've got any Paracetamol.'

'There's one I'm not allowed to have. I can't remember right now which one.'

Feebs comes back with a packet of painkillers and a thermometer, which she washes under the kitchen tap before she takes Rosie's temperature. It's one of those digital ones that beeps and she grabs it out of Rosie's mouth.

Rosie goes, 'Let me look, you noggin. It's my temperature. I bet you don't even know what normal is.'

'Yours is forty degrees. Is that normal?'

'That's well high.' She can't remember if it's on the dangerous side.

'You need to lie down. Let's find the spare bedroom. They've all started watching horror films.'

Rosie doesn't even like horror movies. She does feel better lying down, even though she's missing what might be her last chance with Joe. They can't find any sheets so she lies on the bare mattress. Feebs tucks her under a cover that has a fringe.

'We'll come and check on you every hour.' She gives Rosie a comforting kiss on the forehead.

'Feebs.'

'Yeah, what?'

'You've missed your calling. You should be a teenage mother.'

Rosie drifts in and out of dreams of being burned at the stake, which make her wonder whether she ought to be a Christian instead of a Wiccan. She dozes in and out of screams and scary music from downstairs. Feebs and Megs take turns coming in with the thermometer and fizzy orange. Hardly any time passes before the window gets light and noisy birds begin to compete with the movie soundtrack. Next time Rosie wakes up it's bright day and the other three

are snoring on the floor. She needs a wee so she climbs over them. After she's used the loo, which isn't a pretty sight, she totters downstairs.

'Ro-Ro! You all right?'

Tom is standing in front of the open fridge, spooning something from a plastic bag into a pot of black cherry yoghurt.

'What the bollocks are you doing?'

'It's my breakfast, mate. I have it every day. Yoghurt with a side of marry-juana.' He says the last bit with Spanish pronunciation.

Rosie loses it. 'You are so stupid. If you had to have drugs through a tube into your bloodstream you wouldn't want to mess around with that stuff. You're always drunk or stoned these days. If I was healthy I wouldn't waste my life, I'd make something of it. I'm going to, anyway, even though I've got leukaemia.' Ow. Her tongue hurts.

Jay ought to be at work but she's taken the morning off because of Rosie being so ill. Jay works part time in Racial Harassment Prevention, which is part of Community Safety. Last year, four hundred and ninety-six racist incidents were reported to the Suffolk Police, while Suffolk schools reported five hundred and twenty-one. Since the attack on the Twin Towers, the RHP has registered an increase in Islamophobia, racists jostle or spit at women who wear hijab, racists spray graffiti that says, Kill all islum scum! or, Die Paki Pigs, on the walls of houses, they terrify those among the houses' inhabitants who are old enough to read, who are probably not Muslims anyway, who may in fact be Hindus, Christians or atheists. As the weather gets warmer, racists chuck cans from moving vehicles at anyone who appears to be of South Asian or Middle Eastern origin. Racism against Gypsy Travellers, migrant workers and asylum seekers also threatens to rise like a stinking tide of cracked plastic and rotten fish. Racists still attack people of African or African-Caribbean-English heritage, even though Rosie says the only racists at her school are such idiots that nobody pays attention to them. Racism is worse in rural areas, for instance in schools where the teachers say, We don't really have a problem, there aren't any Black people, as though racism is caused by Black people. Jay's job is education and

prevention, which is one of the most important things in the world: to help children to understand each other and history, especially if it prevents any more murders, forty years ago in the basement of a church in Alabama, three fourteen-year-old girls and an eleven year old, could have been Rosie, ten years ago in London, an A-level student who wanted to be an architect, while he was waiting for a bus. Last week at police training Jay felt herself turn red all over and break out in a cold sweat when the trainer said, Murdered for no reason except the colour of his skin. Skin colour is not a reason for murder. Murdered for no reason except racism. Her work is urgent: young people like Rosie may find themselves sinking under the swell of rotting discrimination and historical detritus, but though Jay knows it to be urgent it's shrunk out of focus and all those other children's needs have dimmed, because she can only see her own child.

Rosie is lying on top of the covers in her Bella Swanson School of Dancing T-shirt, she looks too thin and pale, her hair's tied back in a scarf, she felt too ill to comb it. Her hand is bandaged over a cannula, a thin plastic tube with a stopper that medical staff use to draw blood or infuse drugs, mostly antibiotics. It's weird how the papers always say, Battling cancer. Brave Teen Battles Leukaemia. Rosie looks too exhausted to battle anything, maybe she could love her leukaemia to extinction instead: Brave Teen So Kind to Cancer Cells They Turn Benign.

Besides work, Jay is also supposed to be organising a bone marrow donor registration session for the African Caribbean Leukaemia Foundation. She breaks into a sweat again, she can't be sure whether it's the pressure of all the tasks she isn't accomplishing, or menopause, or the heating, which is switched on in the children's wards even during the summer. Rosie has one of the isolation rooms at the end of the corridor in Mildred Ward, she was admitted yesterday with an infection in her mouth, Jay spent the night because there are two beds. She refuses to allow entry to the thought that Rosie could die of septicaemia before they find a match for her bone marrow but it lurks at the periphery of her mind. She'll stay for the doctors' rounds and then nip into work.

The clock ticks, the boy in the next room groans.

'Want me to comb your hair?'

'My scalp hurts. I need the loo.'

When Rosie comes back from the toilet, Jay pats her lap. ‘Come and sit on my knee.’

‘I’m too big.’

‘You’ll never be too big until you’re bigger than me and I’ve shrunk smaller than you and then I’ll sit on your knee.’

Rosie snuggles onto her lap, she leans against Jay for five comforting minutes and then asks, ‘Can I have some fizzy apple?’

‘What did your last servant die of?’

‘Ha ha.’

The corridor has the cliché hospital odour of overcooked cabbage even though the lunch cart hasn’t arrived yet. Jay fetches Rosie a drink from the babies’ kitchen, the nurses allow her to store food in the fridge because they’ve known her and Rosie for eleven years.

‘Tell me a story. Tell me how you and Mel got together.’

‘I’ve told you a million times already.’

‘Tell me. Go on, go on, go on.’

Jay lived with her mother after her father left, her mother sent her sister to boarding school when she caused trouble but Jay would never in a million years send Rosie away from home. Jay left when she was sixteen, her mother didn’t search for her, she slept in a homeless centre and that was the beginning of the Mad Years and the Teepee Years. Jay has told Rosie about the Teepee Years but not the Mad Years:

The Mad Years

425 hot dinners:

burgers

fried chicken

dim sum

curry goat

312 penises:

red, purple, brown, black, pink

Various fingers

2 syringes of antibiotics

Smoke:

tobacco

The Teepee Years

1,211 hot dinners:

rice & veg

soup

bean stew

nut roast

1 penis

(for < 1 year)

Her own fingers

Tetanus vaccine

Smoke:

tobacco

hash	grass
opium	wood fires
Lysergic acid diethylamide	Homeopathic remedies
Cocaine crystals	Herbal teas
Dry-cleaning fluid	Magic mushrooms
Alcohol	Alcohol
Cannabis tincture	Acupuncture needles

After the Teepee Years she went to college to learn photography and film and video production, she got good at directing and editing videos but she was no good at intimacy. She went out with Isaac, she slept with Isaac, he was always pleased to see her. He would cuddle her against his fat belly and dance in perfect synchrony with the music and Jay's rhythm. She and Isaac agreed about US foreign policy in the Caribbean, about the most powerful nation in the world riding in on Black Hawk helicopters and Cobra gunships to lay down the law, but it seemed that agreement on US foreign policy hardly provided sufficient foundation for a lasting relationship. Isaac would call round at three in the morning when Jay had to get up for work at eight. The dog was the last straw, Jay pictures a camel bending at the knees, its four legs bent forward like humans' or elephants' knees, until the last straw breaks its back, Isaac made a living selling draw, he bought the pit bull to guard his house while he was out in case someone tried to steal his stash, he kept the dog in the back yard, he wanted it to be fierce. Jay didn't mean to get pregnant, she might feel ashamed of her own lack of loyalty and responsibility but how could she ever be ashamed of Rosie?

That's not the story she tells Rosie.

'Well, Isaac, is a great cook and a great dancer, and everyone likes him. But we didn't have a lot in common and so we split up before I knew I was pregnant with you. I met Mel after he moved from Brighton to run the cinema, but I was so busy making a film I had no time to talk to him. Then when me and Isaac separated, I bumped into Mel again. I needed a break from having a boyfriend but Mel took me for picnics at the beach and we were both crazy about movies. He invited me to the cinema and brought me a cup of tea while I was watching a film. I fell for the tea, because it implied he could be caring as well as charming.'

He never said, Earth to Jay, called her a space cadet or said, I soon come. He was good at being comfortable, he made her feel comfortable and he looked like Ewan McGregor.

‘Then I found out I was pregnant, and I knew from the timing that Isaac was definitely your father. I couldn’t wait to meet you. I felt sad because I didn’t think Mel would want to go out with me any more if I was having a baby. But we kept seeing each other. Zelda was my birth partner but she was away the weekend you arrived. So Mel kept me company. He was the first person ever to hold your hand, in the entire world. The day you were born was the happiest day of my life.’

Which was hardly true at the time, but has become true. How strange, that truth changes along with everything else. The truth at the moment is that Jay keeps feeling immersed in waves of rage because Rosie insists on doing stuff that can’t be good for someone with leukaemia, such as going to an all-night party, or eating chocolate instead of organic grains and vegetables. Accepting that Rosie is old enough to decide for herself doesn’t prevent Jay’s fury, she has to devote her energy to helping Rosie do what she wants safely, she has no idea what to do with her anger.

The boy in the next room is screaming again. Mel doesn’t know how Rosa can sleep at night.

‘Don’t you wish he’d shut up?’

‘That’s not very nice.’

‘I said it quietly so he can’t hear.’

‘He must be in pain or he wouldn’t keep yelling,’ says Rosa. ‘Tell me about your life. Tell me about when you lived on that houseboat with Betty and Derek. Tell me about when you and Mum got together.’

When he met Jay she reminded him of the Spanish actor Rossy de Palma with her dark eyes and long crooked nose. In spite of a chin and mouth too small to balance her huge eyes and broad forehead, something androgynous about her face intrigued him. You wait two years for a woman and then two come along at once. The other possible lover worked in IT, but she had an annoying habit of sniffing all the time. Mel was in the pub with her the night Jay rang to say the

baby was being born; he had thought they might end up in bed but after the pub shut he took a taxi to the hospital.

‘You hungry?’ he asks. He’s brought takeout from the Maharani.

‘Tell me,’ says Rosa, but Jay comes in with plates and cutlery and their conversation disappears into serving food.

After they’ve eaten, Jay keeps him company while he smokes a cigarette next to a black bin surrounded by squashed butts. The wind has died down and the sun glows from behind the car park.

‘Let’s go for a walk,’ she says.

‘OK. Not far though. Listen, I’m leaving you the car.’

They find a bench that overlooks staff parking rather than visitor parking. He rolls another cigarette.

‘Did you get a chance to look at the red book?’ she asks.

‘What?’

‘The BMT book.’

‘I haven’t really had a chance, love, what with my hearing. Plus I’ve got to go to London tomorrow, remember.’

She kisses his cheek. ‘Oh God, I forgot to ask about your hearing. How’d it go?’

‘Lonnie booked a meeting room off the Council Chamber, presumably in the hope I’d find it intimidating.’

‘Who was there?’

‘I went with my UNISON rep, who turned out to be really cute. My gaydar went on red alert. Short back and sides, trouser suit and Doc Martens. Besides Lonnie, there was some woman from Human Resources. Tell the truth, I relaxed and sat like this, to wind Lonnie up.’ Mel lounges back and crosses an ankle over a knee.

Jay leans against his shoulder and tucks a hand inside his jacket. He blows out smoke above her head.

‘Was it awful?’

‘I spent most of the meeting making notes of all the ludicrous jargon he came out with: you’re in my radar; let’s touch base about that offline; key drivers in ensuring the future safety of data. In fact recently he’s been quite tolerant and caring, maybe because he knows Rosa has leukaemia.’ He stubs out his cigarette

on the side of the bench; he doesn't want Jay to move. 'I waited outside for five minutes while they discussed it, then the HR drone told me no written warning, no misconduct, and Lonnie should have held an investigatory meeting. Ha! That'll teach him to waste everybody's time.'

'So what's your London meeting?' She slides her hand under his T-shirt. He sucks his belly in. Her hands are always cold.

'Association of Independent Film Exhibitors.'

'Is that the same as COMEX?'

Consortium of Media Exhibitors. 'COMEX hasn't existed for three or four years. I sort of miss it.'

'What d'you miss?'

'Stuff like screenings of drama-documentaries about Japanese people reminiscing in the afterlife, and chats over a drink and a meal. I've forgotten why I'm telling you this. Am I boring you?'

'I like to hear about your work. But I need to tell you about the red book, which is all about extremely toxic drugs with hideous side effects and scary viruses. We've got to read through it with Rosie, but I think we should let her enjoy the summer first.'

'Have they heard anything about a match? It's a shame you're not a good match.'

'Not yet. Not in the UK. They're running searches in the States.'

'My mum spoke to Isaac's sister. His whole family has signed up for the register. Thirty per cent survival rate for patients in transition from an existing condition.'

'It might be better not to know,' she says.

'If I could save Rosa from having to go through this, I'd give my life, let alone my bone marrow. Right now. Without a second thought.'

'I know you would.' Jay rests her head against his neck. She smells of hospitals. 'Fifty years is plenty. I'd swap my life like that—' she clicks her fingers '—for Rosie being well.'

'No, you need to have an exhibition. Or get your photos published in a book.'

She sits up and stares in his eyes as if the force of her gaze will convince him. 'It's great you believe in me, but I'm older than you.'

‘Only a couple of years.’

‘But I’ve had enough of a life. I’m quite satisfied.’

‘But Rosa needs you more than she needs me.’

‘What are we arguing about? Don’t let’s argue about who gets to give up their life so Rosie can have perfect health, because it’s not actually an option. Like, one she can have a matched unrelated donor transplant, two she could have a haplo-identical transplant from me or Isaac, three you could sacrifice yourself so she wouldn’t need a transplant, or four I could ditto.’

He puts his cigarette end in his pocket and pulls Jay to her feet. ‘Let’s go back.’

She’s right: they shouldn’t argue. Squeezing her in a hug, he lifts so her feet leave the ground. Her weight drags solid and heavy and real against his arms.

Two

I run away. I jump on the blue and black. All the babies clap their hands and I clap. All the babies eat with spoons and I eat with a spoon. Gently. Good girl. I know how to say the words. Mine. Let him play with it, it's not yours, Rosie you have to share. The sun has got his hat on, hip hip hip hooray. Sit down now and be a good girl.

It feels like it wants to go in my bottom and then it goes out and it feels good. My mother says, Look, you've done a good poo, and I see what I have done on my nappy.

I sit behind my mother and hold on tight and we zoom. I hide behind the gold. My mother gives me a crackly bag of brown that melts in my mouth and tastes sweet. I want and then I don't want. I can say Hiya and Tara.

I sit in the box and dip for water. I water the flowers. Walls everywhere there are walls. Hold on tight we zoom. Throw it, don't eat it. The feathery quacking ones run and they are funny and they are hungry. I don't want their beaks to nip my fingers. They are ducks. The bright touches my eyes and the soft.

I am not my mother. I am not my father. I thought there was no difference but I am one of the stupid ones who cannot push or carry. I can't give the nana or make the music play. I have stupid wobbly legs and a big head even though I believed I was the same as them. I can't talk so they understand me. I forget where I came from. I have to learn everything all over again.

I feel hot and my neck hurts. It hurts give me my mother. It hurts give me my blankie. Because I hit and kick and shout and scream, they spike me. Because I am beginning to know the difference between myself and another. The snake mother weighs me down with her hands. The spike is agony. All the babies get tubes in them when they are naughty.

We go a long time and noisy, we go on the train to see my Mel. I sit on my mother's hip. I say, Hiya. We get fat hot chips in paper.

It's brilliant sweeping across London in a taxi, through the warm summer evening, all dressed up. We zoom in five lanes of traffic round the edge of a huge park that my mother says is Hyde Park and stop in front of a massive modern hotel. Secretly I feel a bit disappointed it's got no resemblance to the castle when Mel took me to Disneyland Paris that had turrets and spires with pointy roofs. But we tip out onto an actual red carpet and even though it's not like some handsome prince will bow and ask me to dance, it's still my first ball.

We don't know where we're going. My mother signals with her eyes towards a glamorous couple in evening dress.

'Let's follow them,' I whisper.

In spite of the extreme awkwardness and embarrassment of not knowing anyone, I feel excited to walk into a long room that's a prequel to the ball. White people behind tables serve drinks to well-dressed black people like the world is back to front, like in my favourite book, *Noughts and Crosses*. We wait at the edge until a young woman smiles and begins to chat to us. She's called Angela, and she works as a life coach and studies psychology at university, and she's here with her husband.

'Are you doing A levels?' she asks, which makes me feel better because I must look older than fifteen.

'I'm doing GCSEs. My favourites are Child Development and Drama. I really want to do Psychology A level.'

I used to want to be a doctor until my mother encouraged me to watch this programme about medical students. All the gory, yucky things they had to investigate and cut out put me off forever and a day but I still want to help children who get ill. Maybe I can work as a psychologist in a hospital, or a therapist like that woman I went to see when I was thirteen.

Angela sips her drink, which is clear and fizzy. I've got orange juice because rum might be a bit strong this early in the evening. Angela begins to tell me about the experiment on monkeys with cloth mothers and wire mothers that

Miss Younger told us about in Child Development. Then she tells me about another experiment where they made half the participants gaolers and the other half prisoners, except the gaolers turned so cruel they had to stop before it was finished.

We go through and find our table. The ballroom is absolutely massive, lit in a subtle way by chandeliers that make all the silver and glasses on the coloured cloths sparkle. Each table has a celebrity host and we hoped we'd get to sit with our favourite singer-songwriter, Beverley Knight, or maybe this guy who's a comedian that my mother saw in Black History Month, but we can't really choose because Shirley gave us free tickets because Mum and Mel organised a bone marrow donor session. Tickets cost about a hundred and fifty pounds each and my mother is trying to save money for after I have my transplant when she won't be able to work. The hosts haven't arrived yet. Angela and her husband are at the next table but they swap so I can sit between my mother and Angela. On the other side of my mother is a really quiet woman, like she's cautious, not unfriendly but wary, as though my mother might smell or drink too much or say something rude.

Everybody claps and whistles while the celebrities make their entrances and line up on the stage. Beverley Knight is wearing a full-length fitted dress that has mauve ruched panels and a red gauze strapless bodice with velvet flowers, which would sound hideous if someone described it to me but looks amazing and is probably by some designer.

'It's so much better being a woman,' says Angela. 'Men have to go with the dinner-jacket, white-shirt and bow-tie option, or African dress. Whereas look at the women!'

I look: short cocktail dresses, long ball gowns, saris, versions of salwar kameez or trouser suits.

'I love your locket. Is it antique?' Angela asks.

'Mum, is it antique?' It's the only jewellery I'm wearing because I wanted to keep things simple. I have an off-white wool stole, which means a posh kind of pashmina, embroidered with white beads over a dusty rose, strapless dress with a full skirt and an underskirt. Dusty rose doesn't sound right, as though it needs dusting; maybe it should be dusky rose.

‘I’m not sure.’ My mother looks as if she wants to say something else but stops.

The food is a bit crap, specially for a hundred and fifty pounds, plus I can’t eat much because I’ve got another mouth ulcer. The tube of ointment Martha gave me is in my bag but I’m waiting to go to the loo before I dab it on my tongue. I’m not going to let a sore tongue spoil my evening. I sip my fizzy wine and listen to the conversation.

Angela says, ‘Peas and rice!’ when they serve the main course.

‘The rice never see a coconut, or a onion,’ says her husband.

He works in London mentoring young men. A mentor is a role model, and I wonder whether it’s like at school where they call the black kids out of class and we have to go to the Special Needs Unit and talk to Mrs Richards. Except there was this whole furore because Mrs Richards is white. The woman who did it before Mrs Richards left because she got fed up with all the teachers being so racist they would act surprised that she dressed nicely and was intelligent. She told Vonnette they behaved as though they expected a monkey who lived in a tree and Vonnette told my mother. Also parents got upset because they said it made out their kids were stupid to have to go to SNU. My mother went to a big meeting. It was really confusing because on the one hand the school should listen to what the parents think but on the other hand it’s also prejudiced for people to despise Special Needs. I’m certain it’s prejudiced, even though I totally want to be normal and not one of the people who have learning difficulties.

The woman next to my mother asks where I got my hair done and then cheers up and leans across and shows me all the different pictures spray-painted on her acrylic nails, which are amazing miniature masterpieces of landscapes with flowers and animals. She goes disapproving again when we spill gravy down our dresses but Angela is really nice and says it’s the sort of thing she normally does. We head for the Ladies to try to scrub it off. Even the loos are posh. We get the giggles.

‘I can’t believe we both spilled gravy.’

‘What are we like? We’re a disgrace,’ says Mum.

We mop away with towels, which aren’t even paper towels but kind of small white flannels, and I put gel on my tongue.

The pudding is a disappointment. Afterwards, before we get to the dancing, Shirley introduces a young man who had his bone marrow transplant on 11th September 2001, so at least something good happened that day. He sings Sweet Thing, which Mary J Blige sings as a love song, like to a person, but he turns it into praise of being alive, as though the sweet thing is life itself.

When Shirley announces a break and advises us to take the opportunity to meet our favourite celebrities, my mother asks, ‘Is there anybody you want to meet?’

‘I don’t like meeting famous people because I don’t know what to say. You go.’

It’s nearly eleven but the dancing still hasn’t started.

‘Once I finish my degree, next year, I want to carry out research into how transplants affect patients’ personalities,’ says Angela.

‘I’ve got to have a bone marrow transplant,’ I tell her.

‘I had one six years ago. It’s really terrifying, but you’ll come through. I can see you’re a positive person.’

It’s true: I’ve made myself a vow to go through the terrifying ordeal without any fear or anything except determination to get better. ‘So, what’s your research about?’

‘I hope I can get funding. First I want to find out whether patients consider a transplant has changed them. If it has, I need to try to discover whether changes are caused by the experience of undergoing the treatment, or by memories in donor cells, which some people’ve suggested has happened with heart transplant recipients.’

‘It sounds really interesting. Can I be part of your research?’ I really like Angela so I don’t want to say that it seems kind of scary that maybe my transplant will change me and I won’t be Rosie any more.

‘Let’s swap numbers so we can keep in touch. Sometimes participants have to be over eighteen, because of ethics, which is—’

‘She’s so lovely!’ My mother arrives back all excited because when she asked this actor, Can I take your photo to show my friends in Ipswich? the woman said, No, my dear, you must have your picture taken with me. She got one of her friends to snap them together.

I feel all fond of my mother until she says, 'Vonnegut and I laughed till our cheeks ached when we saw her in *The Vagina Monologues*.'

Shut up! She said vagina in public and somehow it's even more embarrassing because she sticks out here as a white person. I want to disappear off the face of the planet but then the auction begins and I can't believe my eyes and ears. The man is asking people to bid on items like a red boxing glove signed by Lennox Lewis, or a football shirt signed by the England team, and he's talking hundreds of pounds and then thousands. Somebody pays three thousand pounds for a T-shirt signed by Thierry Henry! Three thousand pounds is nearly enough to live on for a year! I don't want to say anything in case it's normal to have that kind of money and I never realised, but then Angela says, 'Oh my God, I thought we were well off because we could afford tickets.'

While I drink fizzy water so I won't get too drunk, I realise that I fit right in. Nearly everybody here has a nose that blends into their cheeks rather than jutting out. Most people have hair that grows upwards into curls and stays in place when it's braided rather than hanging down or slipping loose. The women have rounded bottoms and bellies instead of sagging or flat or skinny. Really there's not a lot of difference between people with smooth noses, black hair, brown eyes and rounded bottoms and those who have smooth hair, beaky noses and flat arses, so I've always just got on with it and acted like there's no difference whatsoever. But I've always been on the wrong side of that hardly-any divide, like being the only black girl in the class. Or the one who gets shouted at when I'm staying with Amma and Zelda, Go back to the swamp, which is so stupid it's not worth worrying about. When I was growing up, me and Mum always used to watch *The Cosby Show* and *Fresh Prince*, where the families are really normal-for-TV and well off, not gangstas or rappers or starving Africans, but in Ipswich most of the kids who went to African-Caribbean Saturday school came from quite poor families and me and my mother used to be poor. My mother's friends who are black like Vonnegut and Sharon are poor rather than well off like Siouxsie or even Mel. So in spite of being tired it's a brilliant feeling, like there's an entire world of possibilities where I fit right in. I can go to balls and pay a thousand pounds for an African figurine and people will like me and I won't have to worry about sliding into

Losers' Limbo. I feel at home instead of being the odd one out. Even if there's no handsome prince to ask me to dance, I've found myself.

Jay's been so busy looking after Rosie in hospital and at home and then catching up at work that she hasn't had time to go to the gym or talk to her friends. She finally manages to meet Vonnette in a pub near where she and Rosie lived before Brook Road. She never went inside because it used to be frequented by some guys who ran a crack house on the main road.

'It's under new management,' says Vonnette. 'I think two women have taken it on.'

The floor has been sanded and left bare, the walls are cream decorated with white fairy lights and the tables chunky pine, occupied by normal-looking couples and after-work groups. Jay and Vonnette clink glasses and swig wine.

'So how's Rosie?'

'She's doing really well. She made a cake this afternoon.' She doesn't think Vonnette will want to hear about Rosie's neutrophils and platelet levels. 'How about Garvey and Malika?'

While Vonnette brings her up to date with their plans and achievements, Jay realises how relieved she feels to be out with a woman friend. She met Vonnette at the big playground in Christchurch Park when she and Rosie first moved to Ipswich more than ten years ago, after Rosie nearly died and Jay gave up her job and turned into a White-trash-single-mother-on-benefits, after Mel found them a house to rent in Ipswich rather than inviting them to move in with him. She felt lonely because Mel was working all hours but Vonnette took her under her wing. Malika was only a year older than Rosie, it was a shame that the two girls never warmed to each other. Jay loved Vonnette's intelligence, curiosity and uncritical sense of humour. Although Vonnette has low self-esteem, Jay thinks of her as the Queen of Ipswich because whenever they go out clubbing the bouncers usher her and her entourage to the head of the queue, the coat-check girls hang her coat for free and the bartenders always serve her first. Jay felt accepted by Vonnette and her friend Sharon, in contrast to the immense effort she's always made to be respectable and never let Rosie leave the house

with natty hair, ashy skin or clothes that aren't spick and span, in order not to shame African-Caribbean mothers and bring down the race.

Vonnette thrusts her fag packet at Jay. 'Go on.'

'I gave up. Four years now. Pay attention.'

'You must be stressed. You need a smoke.' Vonnette lights one. 'I tried to give up but I put on too much weight.'

'You're gorgeous. You're looking skinny.'

'Oh please.'

'I felt a lot worse about myself when I was a teenager, in spite of being closer to the ideal.'

'True. Malika's always dieting these days, and then she blames me for having the wrong body because she's inherited my tendency to flab. I think you accept yourself more as you get older.' Vonnette taps ash into the glass ashtray.

'I tell myself I'm turning into a fine figure of a woman.'

'Although there's always room for improvement.' Vonnette balances her fag on the ashtray and grabs a handful of thigh encased in dark denim. 'I could do with a bit less of this. And this.' She pinches a roll of midriff.

'If you've got a sharp knife I'll come round next week and slice that bit off. Kitchen table surgery. We could make a fortune.' Jay clamps her fingertips at her hairline and pushes back towards her scalp. 'Think I need a facelift?'

'I'll borrow the big stapler from school.'

With their second glass, problems spill out. Vonnette is worried about Garvey, not because he hasn't got good sense but because the police keep stopping him when he's driving and it's so easy for a young African-Caribbean-English man to get into trouble he's neither caused nor contributed to. She keys Jay's line manager's number into her phone for next time it happens: DWB.

Jay dares to admit her own rage, or at least some of it. 'I get so angry all the time. They're not going to renew my contract because I've taken too much time off to look after Rosie, which makes me feel helpless and frustrated. But the worst thing is feeling angry with Rosie. I want her to eat organic brown rice and veg to strengthen her immune system but she loves cheese and chocolate. I feel furious but I can't tell her. It's burning me up.'

'Well, it would do. But maybe it's more about you than it is about Rosie. I worked with this woman whose husband had cancer. He wanted to follow the

Bristol diet: that is such a complicated diet. It made her vex because she also had two kids to cook for.'

Rosie chucks her bag in the back, climbs into the front and changes the tape in the player. Once they're off the main road, on the shortcut, she asks, 'Did you take some photos?'

'I'm still working on the apples. I'm looking at how colour or light can make the apples look round or flat, or close or distant.'

As well as the focal length, but that would be too complicated to explain. Jay tucks the Citroën next to the verge and waits as a car approaches along the narrow lane between fields.

'Colour photos?'

'I wish I had a colour printer. I did some when I was at college, but the chemicals are complicated, you can't develop prints in trays like you can with black and white. And you need a colour enlarger, you have to get the exposures right for cyan, magenta and yellow.'

'I know yellow, and magenta is that colour that's like fuchsia pink, but what's cyan?'

'It's a turquoise blue. Remember when you did colours at primary school? The primary colours with pigments are yellow, blue and red. You mix yellow and blue to get green...'

She indicates right and pulls out again.

'If you mix blue and red you get purple, if you mix red and yellow you get orange,' says Rosie.

'And if you mix them all up, you get brown. But there are different colour systems. Like the primary colours of light are red, green and blue. If you mix green and blue you get cyan. Red and blue make magenta, and green and red make yellow. Which are the colours you use for photographs. And if you mix them all together, you get white.'

'That sounds...erm.'

Jay laughs. 'Incredibly boring? There are other colour systems, too. You know chakras, the energy centres in your body? Some people reckon they have colours. The root chakra is red, and the one at your abdomen is orange, and your

solar plexus is yellow. Your heart could be pink or green, your throat is turquoise, your third eye is blue and the one at your fontanelle is violet.'

'Like a rainbow.'

'Except for the pink or green, yeah. Want to eat now or wait till we get there?'

'Let's picnic on the beach.'

'Now you tell me something.'

'We presented our projects in Drama and Mrs Evans said mine and Barbie's was really strong and would get an A star if it was GCSE. Next year we'll put on a play in the Arts Centre and you can come and watch it.'

'God, well done. You are so brilliant.'

Jay keeps quiet for a while as she negotiates roundabouts and joins the A12. On the dual carriageway she shuts her window, Rosie turns the music up and they sing along to Sweet Honey in the Rock even though neither of them can hold a tune. They pass a village where nobody talks to one mother at the primary school, maybe because she wears hijab, and the other kids call her children names. Jay's job makes her experience the county as a map of racist incidents and anti-racist projects, she notices a sign for a town whose secondary school organises exchanges with a school in Ghana.

The sea isn't really flat, it heaves and swells. They eat their lunch in the dunes and Rosie has stomach pains. She looks thin and pale, as though she's fading away, she lies on a rug while Jay walks along the edge of the waves, along the beach that stretches lines of shingle and sand towards the nuclear power station, a white circle in the distance. Massive doses of radiation are the only known cause of AML. Jay's father worked at Sellafield during the fifties when there were leaks. Rosie's AML must be caused by the human-granulocyte-stimulating-factor injections, which Jay requested, but maybe radiation leaks caused her Kostmann's Syndrome, Jay would rather believe it was nuclear radiation than all the mutagenic drugs she stuffed down her own throat when she was young and stupid.

The clouds seem to press lower, shrinking the space between earth and sky. Jay wades through the edge of the waves to avoid a bank of pebbles big enough to hurt her feet, bubbles fizz against her ankles, the water's not too cold, she could go for a swim. Will Mel be all right? She'll have to find time to make

love with him: after they'd been together five years he said the things he liked most about her were the wild sex and the fact that she never hassled him to get involved with the baby. She wants him to be involved with Rosie this time, she can't go through that again on her own.

She turns and walks back. The sea is a dark colour in between grey and blue, the foam very white even though clouds cover the sun. Not far up the coast the sea flooded in and buried the capital city of East Anglia under water and silt, eight hundred years ago houses, farms, churches and a hospital were all drowned, she hopes that mothers and fathers and children, bakers and brewers, farmers and nuns had time to leave before the deluge. People still claim they can hear the church bells ringing.

The sea is so immense that it's made the inside of Jay's head feel spacious and empty. She strides up to the dunes.

'Can we do the spell now, Mum? I've got candles.'

Jay collects pebbles, shells and feathers, arranges them in a huge circle on a patch of sand and follows Rosie round the circumference as they cast the circle, which Rosie explains means making a protected space, outside time. Jay bends to sweep with a bunch of seaweed while Rosie chants, 'Cleansed be, safe be, any badness leave thee.'

It's a cloudy day during the school term, the beach remains fairly empty. Rosie pauses while a couple of women with little kids make a detour to avoid them, she waits till they're out of earshot before she asks, 'Which way is north?'

She places a black pebble at the northernmost point of the circle and lights a purple candle.

'Oh powers of earth, be with me now. Guard my circle and my rites. Bring me your healing and your wisdom, so my bone marrow transplant will cure me.'

'Blessed Kuan Yin, please heal Rosie and keep her safe and well,' adds Jay. Compassionate Buddha, goddess with the child and the willow branch, Dragon Lady, star of the sea.

'Purple for healing serious illness, it says in my book,' says Rosie.

'Purple must relate to your crown chakra, where you can channel energy from heaven.'

Rosie lights an incense cone in the east, where she invokes the powers of air. She lights a yellow candle for the south and calls on fire.

‘Can you get some water for the west, Mum?’

Jay steps outside the circle. ‘Do we have to close it again now I’ve crossed it?’ She scoops seawater into a cockleshell. ‘Look!’

A seal bobs in the swell a bit further out. It looks at them with dark eyes.

‘That has to be a good omen. I’m so happy. If I lived on the beach I’d never get miserable or grumpy.’

‘Yes you would.’ Rosie says it kindly.

‘Want to go to the teashop and get cakes?’

Nothing but the shush of a breeze in the leaves and the cooing of birds. Jay would probably know what they’re called. Mel slashes his biro across a typo and substitutes hilarious in the margin. He must have done at least half an hour on his front. Sweat has pooled in the small of his back and dripped from his armpits to form damp patches round his elbows on the towel. He slides the brochure proofs into their folder. He’ll drop them at the printers on his way home.

The surface of the pool is already littered with grass, leaves and insects that are either drowned or in their death throes. He fetches the net from the clubhouse and trawls it round before he swims. He bats a wasp away. The water touches his body with a shock as delicious as swallowing ice-cold beer. The skin tightens on his feet and legs, balls and buttocks as he lowers himself step by step. Studies show, as Jay would say, that men think about sex every seven seconds, but how could they carry out a study like that? If Mel had to press a button every time sex crossed his mind, the button would cause more frequent crossings. Suppose they could attach a monitor to a site in the brain that registers thoughts about sex? Somewhere in the thalamus or hypothalamus, he supposes, only it’s so long since he studied human biology. It’s the most natural thing in the world for humans to require sexual excitement and satisfaction. And since marriage is an institution perpetuated by capitalism and patriarchy to enable possession of a woman, or women, and to establish fatherhood, and inheritance of wealth by sons, then Mel is on the side of feminists in his opposition to marriage and lifelong fidelity. Which can be natural only to prairie voles, beavers and certain

species of geese. Yet even though it's so obvious that no man or woman will find the same sexual partner exciting forever, when he and Jay broke up he couldn't adjust. Like one of those illusions in Rosa's book, where one second he can see it as a vase and the next as two profiles, but never both at the same time, he knows that Jay is the love of his life so far but he also knows another fifteen years with the same partner would stifle him.

The water is clear and hardly smells of chlorine; they seem to have got the chemicals right this year. He can sense gradations of heat as he swims from shade into full sun.

The nappy drying on the rail used to be Rosa's, fifteen years ago but it still absorbs moisture efficiently. The clubhouse with its reject furniture and copies of *Naturist Weekly* reeks of mould. He takes his water bottle out of the fridge. Outside, he drags his towel into the sun. He's lucky to tan easily, especially for someone with red hair. It's getting late enough in the afternoon that he probably doesn't need sun spray but Rosa's cancer diagnosis has made him cautious.

He'll do half an hour on his back. He lights a cigarette and starts to go through the bone marrow transplant guide.

This unit has carried out over 2100 bone marrow transplants and is proud and privileged to offer you its skill and experience in the They reckon September: two months in hospital in London. They've found a Matched Unrelated Donor in the USA. Mel had to take Rosa to hospital in Brighton once. She must have been about eight and they were visiting his parents while Jay was away with Zelda on their first weekend together without kids. When Brighton said she needed to be admitted for IV antibiotics, Rosa asked if she could go to Ipswich Hospital instead because she knew all the doctors and nurses. So he rang Ipswich Paediatric Assessment Unit, where they said they'd have a room ready. The paediatrician at Brighton advised him against travelling but Mel already had their bags in the car. He belted Rosa into the back seat with a cushion and a rug and they were back in Ipswich within two-and-a-half hours.

Hypnotherapist. Art therapist. Aromatherapist.
Spiritual healer. Jay says it's the only NHS hospital in the country where

they have complementary therapists on the payroll. They reckon it improves recovery rates.

He angles the red pamphlet until it shades his eyes. The telephone in your room receives incoming calls only. BT charge cards can be used on these phones to make outside calls. You are advised to apply to BT for a card at least a month before you come into hospital. He can make himself useful applying for a phone card so Rosa will be able talk to her friends. Jay always gets daunted by practical tasks. He adds BT charge to card to his mental list. He's collected enough contributions from family and friends to buy Rosa's laptop. Siouxsie put a hundred quid towards it. The new iBook G4 has the OS X operating system, a sixty-GB hard drive, a slot-loading DVD/CD-Rom combo, two USB ports and a built-in mike. All in a rectangular opaque white casing, which Rosa will like although Mel wishes it came in black because he wants one for himself. He'll transfer his balance to a zero-APR card and pay it off inside the six-month limit.

In his peripheral vision he can make out the darting crescents of out-of-focus swallows that swoop lower with the lengthening shadows. He recognises swallows because they nest every year in the soffits of his house.

Diarrhoea. Alopecia. Infertility. Infection. Bleeding. Anaemia. Graft versus host disease (GVHD). Venooclusive disease (VOD). Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP). Not angel dust, then. Rosa's had pneumonia at least twice. Once when they were on holiday in Greece with Zelda, Amma and Kenny, before Kenny walked out. Cytomegalovirus (CMV). Cyto- means pertaining to cells, mega- means huge, so Huge Cell Virus. The donor they've found is CMV-positive, while Rosa is CMV-negative, which makes it more dangerous. It's pointless to worry because there's nothing he can do. Jay wasn't kidding when she warned him about the red book.

He needs distraction. One last dip. Then a cup of tea to wake him up and perk him up, satisfy his thirst and assuage his cravings before he heads to the printers. He'll drop off the proofs and then phone Siouxsie to see if she wants to meet for a drink and a chat. Thinking about Siouxsie he always sees a movie montage with multiple dissolves, layers like something out of that Umberto Eco novel about the monk detective. A palimpsest, in which Siouxsie appears as a

five year old afraid of her dad; Siouxsie top of the class joint equal with himself in primary school; on the bus in her grammar-school uniform, blowing pink gum bubbles; with black hair down to her bum, getting married to Rob, who was a miner in Kent before Thatcher closed the pits; over the moon at promotion to creative director; moving to Essex as regional executive director of a chain of agencies so that once again they could catch movies and meals together. Buying a house that cost a quarter of a million. Their love for each other remains uncomplicated in spite of a glitch when he was fifteen and fancied the knickers off her; she managed to hustle them back into the friendship zone without damaging his ego. They've shared fabulous times and supported each other through catastrophes. Both belong to that generation of kids from working-class families who came of age in the early seventies. They could choose university, salaried careers or skilled manual labour, marriage and families or sex and contraception: an unprecedented range of possibilities. Neither Siouxsie nor he ever wanted children. The plans they made for their lives included houses, cars, holidays and wealth, but not families. Maybe Mel would be better off if he'd stuck to the plan.

He floats on his back while an out-of-focus vapour trail crosses a patch of blue between fuzzy oak leaves. Attendance at ten screenings a day with a view to booking films for Ipswich is work, rather than a holiday as some people assume. But the parties are great. He'd like to fast-forward through the next few weeks and find himself already in his flat-share in Edinburgh. Movies made in the forties used to convey the passage of time by flicking through dates on a calendar. How do they do bridging shots these days? Tilt up to the branch of an oak tree on which acorns form while the leaves turn dark and dusty? Accelerated motion shots of a rapid succession of sunsets and dawns? Fade to black?

Three

They kill me because I am naughty. I am burning. My throat hurts. I am crying and crying. At first I can't breathe and then I glide in a boat on a dark river where ghosts eat what I know out of my skull with spoons. They stick straws up my nose so they can suck my brain. The women dressed in white put what they know into tubes in me. Air, sweet milk and bitter medicine. They take away my voice. They take away my running so I can't move but they can still walk. My mother holds me in her arms in hell. It burns so hot the flames eat me. She must be the snake mother but she sings to me like an angel but she pokes a flaming brand down my throat. The angels stick their spoons down my throat and when I cry no sound comes out. Over and over, world without end, until the other mother rescues me in her arms and carries me up to stars in the grass.

We break their stalks and drop them into my hand. One, two, three, soft. My mother pokes a hole in a long stalk. She slots one through another to make a ribbon for my hair. She gives me a crown of stars.

My mother can still speak. Why did they take away my voice? The sun shines too bright to look at. I roll around on the grass. The ducks come shaking drops of water from their feathers and quack-quacking but I can't quack. I can't speak. I throw bread to the ducks. I lick an ice-lolly.

Amma is the same as me but she is not me. I am bigger than Amma. Amma has no tubes. She pulls the tube off my throat and she is naughty. I will be the doctor. I will listen to her heart and lungs with the stethoscope and poke a needle in her hand so she has to cry. I give her medicine and I bandage her hand.

My mother takes me to Amma's house so I don't see the girls skipping in the street. We don't go to the fish and chip shop any more but I will see Amma every day. We will stay here and we are lodgers and Mel will come and stay when he is not working. He has to go to work a long long way away. Are we nearly there?

Amma eats ten pancakes for breakfast and I eat eleven. I hate Amma because she runs upstairs but I climb slowly. She runs up the hill but I hold my mother's hand. I can't scream and they will hurt me with the tubes if I get too angry.

If we make beds for the fairies, Zelda says they will leave us a present. These are their lamps made of acorn cups. We poke twigs through leaves. These are their chairs and here is their table and their breakfast. My mother says their plates are celandine. That is sheep poo and that is rabbit poo. You mustn't tread in dog poo.

The worst thing about University College London Hospital is Rosa's Hickman line, a tube inserted into one of the major veins that lead to her heart. It has three openings, which they call lumens, so that her heart can pump three lots of drugs round her body at the same time: drugs to destroy her immune system ready for her transplant; drugs to repair damage inflicted by the toxic chemo.

What turns out to be vile and unthinkable is Total Body Irradiation on Monday morning. The first insult consists of having to get up at seven to be ready for the shuttle bus to the Middlesex. Mel doesn't even have time for one cup of tea before he turfs out into the rush hour. He smokes a cigarette on the way to the sandwich bar where the servers use plastic gloves and the cashier doesn't touch the food. He drinks a latte on the way back to UCLH with Rosa's cheese toastie.

At the Middlesex Hospital they descend a lino passage to the Radiotherapy Basement. Radiotherapists fold Rosa onto a gurney with an orange Perspex box around her head and a foam triangle under her knees.

'What music d'you want, darlin?'

Anything to distract her from the horror of being trapped under weights they call bolus, which they pile to mutate her from a human shape into a regular shape for the X-rays.

'Mary J Blige, No More Drama.'

'It feels a bit rude, going through your bag. Oh, here.'

He works out how to slot the disc into the CD player and adjusts the volume. 'You want the track or the whole album?'

'I'll be here for a while.'

'Turn it up before we start the actual treatment, because the machine can be quite noisy,' says a technician whose square body and head like an upturned bowl make him resemble a Lego person.

The music sounds a bit too pop for Mel. The song seems to be about love, rather than anything interesting.

‘Someone told us the company charges fifty quid, even for the smallest bolus! Even though they’re only sheets of plastic heat-sealed round slabs of Vaseline,’ says Rosa.

‘Because they’re vital medical equipment,’ says Lego Man.

‘Right, I’m going to shut up now because I can’t hardly breathe.’

She looks too young and helpless. She looks like someone a hero should rescue without a thought for his own safety. They’ve trussed her into a human sacrifice. The lump in Mel’s throat makes it laborious to chat and stay cheerful while they pull wires, each labelled with a body part, Right Knee or Left Centre, from a metal maypole. He opens her magazine, which is called *Aspire* and features Halle Berry on the cover. He flips through to find the problem page: ‘My alcoholic daughter?’

‘Nah.’

‘Should I cheat? I’m a happily married woman aged thirty-two and I work as an accounts clerk for a large advertising agency. My problem is that all my friends seem to be having extramarital affairs and they tell me I’m boring. I have begun to wonder whether I’m missing out.’

‘That doesn’t even sound like a real problem. What’s the answer?’

‘What answer would you give?’

‘Can’t talk, member. How bout you?’

‘Dear Cheat, it depends what you want. A quick fling might make your life more interesting.’

Rosa laughs. He’s made her laugh.

‘Mel! Really?’

‘I’d say: Maybe you need to get a career that provides enough challenges so you’re not fantasising about hypothetical men.’

‘Excuse me,’ says Lego Man.

Mel shifts out of his way. The radiotherapists align the gurney using red laser beams to make sure it’s in the correct position.

‘OK, we’re going to leave you on your own,’ says Lego Man. ‘We’re monitoring levels all the time through those wires, and we can see you through the camera. Your dad’s going to turn the music up, but shout out if you’re bothered about anything. It’s important to stay as still as you can. Ten minutes, then we’ll treat the other side.’

Treat, as though it's some kind of healing process, as though it's a treat, when it's actually a weapon of mass destruction. Mel kisses the top of Rosa's head, the only part he can reach. He tries to think of a joke to cheer her up, but he can't. Even though he's dying for a cigarette he waits until they've started the machine before he goes outside. It emits a hideous grinding buzz like heavy-duty industrial plant about to saw through a metal girder or pound scrap to smithereens. From the technicians' station halfway up the corridor, he imagines the walls of the basement pressing closer while the ceiling squashes down. The fluorescent tubes flicker, emitting toxic vapours. Any minute now, a circular saw will grind out of the wall and slice through Rosa's gurney. Or spikes will project as the walls close in. There must be some way he can escape with her.

Outside, he lights a Marlboro and sucks in smoke. Hot September sunshine. The streets are quiet since the Congestion Charge. A dark grey splatter-shape on the pavement shows where somebody vomited. Normally Mel would picture an excessively drunk fifteen year old, but today he imagines a teenager throwing up after TBI. Someone's left a double buggy chained to the railings. A man who looks as though he's wearing horror-movie makeup trudges past. The Man with Half a Face, probably on his way to the Middlesex. The Post Office Tower resembles a giant bicycle pump. The Edinburgh Film Festival seems like a lifetime ago instead of only last month.

Mel stubs out his cigarette and forces himself back to the hospital. Back down the corridor into the underground torture chamber while they detach wires, swivel the gurney and reattach the monitors. Outside for another smoke. Back to fetch Rosa, who's subdued. Wait for the shuttle. In past the guard, up in the lift, disinfect his hands. Punch the access code, through the door, disinfect hands. Along the corridor with his arm through Rosa's. Jay is in the sluice room, stuffing bedclothes into the washing machine. Mel has never been so pleased to see anyone in his life.

Jay is living under water, she's diving deep down, the water rises black and thick, the water fills her lungs, she's breathing water, it streams from her hair. The water doesn't feel hot, it doesn't burn but seethes and bubbles as though on the boil. The sound of the water rattles in her ears, the echo of the rattle fades

away. Jay swims through the black water to search for Rosie, she needs to find Rosie. The water presses against Jay's kicking legs, the water suffocates her, she struggles forward through the water that resists her passage. Music swirls in the current, an electric guitar sounds plaintive, a voice declares, Anything is possible with the power of love.

She rushes to the surface of deep water, she wakes on the creaky sofa bed in the hot room. Rosie's gone back to sleep. Jay wraps herself in the dream. She has to believe that her love can protect Rosie. Her love saved Rosie's life last time, her love for Rosie saved her own life.

Rosie's going have her transplant today. A transplant patient is not permitted to know the identity of her donor, nor is the donor allowed any clue to the patient's identity until sufficient time has passed after the transplant succeeds, Jay can't remember if it's a year or five years. In case the recipient should die, obviously, but that notion is forbidden entry to her mind, she makes her mind slippery so that death's fingers can't grip. At least they managed to find a donor who's CMV-negative, as Rosie is herself.

Mel rang yesterday to say he's got a terrible cold, Jay misses him but she has to put Rosie first and herself second because she can't be worrying about whether Mel will get distracted and go off with someone else if she doesn't fulfil all his needs, she wonders whether at some level his cold is self-induced because he can't bear to see Rosie in hospital: nobody with any cold or infection is allowed on the ward, every single patient needs reverse barrier nursing because they have no immunity. Some look sad and skeletal. Plastic cooler boxes labelled Caution Human Organ for Transplant lurk next to the nurses' station as though she and Rosie are living in a science fiction novel. The Victorian building used to be the wing for private patients until the NHS adopted it for transplants because it has private rooms. Four rooms near the exit make up the adolescent unit. A pool table gets moved up and down the corridor, during the evening Jay and Rosie can hear balls clacking against one another. Rosie's room is about the same size as her bedroom at home but two of them have to live in it, for two months. They blu-tacked photos of her sports day and their holiday in Northumberland to the walls, so that wherever they look Phoebe, Megan, Barbie, Tom, Amma and Zelda smile down at them.

Even though Rosie believes she's ordinary, Jay knows she's extraordinary. She took part in a seminar on How to Manage your Hickman Line, she's been learning hypnotherapy, she's been learning how to play pool from the boy in the next room and copying out poems by Yeats from the girl across the corridor. The first week she had chemo, the second radiotherapy. Jay is trying to make each day normal and bearable so that Rosie won't have to project herself into the future when all this will be over but it's getting harder to maintain normality. Jay tries to notice what colours Rosie's emotions seem to be so that she can help her to release them if she gets depressed. She makes herself understand that depression is not itself an emotion but occurs when someone squashes down colours such as anger or fear: royal purple, pillar-box red, ghostly white, mould green; in suppressing the colours they don't want they also erase those that glow bright or soft such as love and hope.

Rosie's supposed to have her transplant in the morning, but after dinner it still hasn't arrived. She's lying back against pillows, wearing a pink T-shirt and black jogging bottoms with pink stripes down the outer seams, pink is one of the heart colours. She clutches a pillow against her tummy for comfort, at least she doesn't look skeletal.

Jay wipes her bed table because the cleaners can't do it when it's cluttered. She moves Rosie's book, her iPod, her pencil case, her notebook, her glass, her remedies, her meds, the fizzy water bottle, the massage oil and a letter from Megan.

'If you picture the donor, what's that person like?'

'We know they're American, but that's all,' says Rosie.

'You can imagine them. When I try to picture who it is, it makes me realise all my ideas of Americans come from books, or movies or TV. Janie Crawford or Scout Finch.' Jay makes an effort to think of characters Rosie knows. 'I start to see Cher in Clueless, or Buffy, or Cassie Logan.'

'I suppose a young woman, mixed like me.'

'Whoever they are, I'm sending them blessings.'

Jay despatches a flock of blessings that will migrate across the Atlantic Ocean, fold their wings to nestle against the donor and chirrup her gratitude.

Rosie smiles when the door opens because the nurse who comes in is her favourite, which must be a good omen, bringing the bone marrow. It's in a bag,

exactly like blood only a bit thicker and browner, an anti-climax, the nurse hangs it from the drip stand exactly like blood. Jay wonders whether there can be enough of it. It seems so basic: they drip it into Rosie's bloodstream, whereupon the stem cells find their way into her bones, carrying specific protein markers on their surfaces that will eventually recognise matching markers on the cells lining the blood vessels in Rosie's bone marrow: like postcodes, or like meeting your loved ones off a plane when you recognise them and hug them tightly to keep them with you; the stem cells attach to the vessel wall, resisting the flow, they step across and through body tissue into the marrow.

The nurse notes observations of Rosie's pulse and blood pressure on her clipboard. She asks Rosie about her friends in the photographs and tells her about her own brothers and sisters.

Jay unpacks her camera, which is loaded with Kodachrome film, which tends to favour blues and yellows so it will enhance the nurse's blue dress but not Rosie's T-shirt; maybe she should have used Fujicolour that brings out greens and reds. Also it's daylight film, which means Rosie's lamp will give the photos a golden cast.

'Do you mind if I take a snap?'

'Oh go on,' says Rosie.

'Sure it's a special occasion,' the nurse says.

She has pale hair, big eyes and a small mouth in a pale face that's rather flat with a large chin. Rosie plays with the tube that carries the bone marrow to her heart as though it's a string for cat's cradle. Jay sets the zoom lens to its widest angle and the shutter speed to a sixtieth of a second, she focuses and clicks the shutter.

Everything gets worse after that. Professor Crick advises a naso-gastric tube. A nurse persuades Rosie to thread a green-and-black plastic tube up her nostril and swallow it, Jay feels like a torturer, egging her daughter on. Rosie can't walk, she needs a wheelchair. Rosie's blood counts are flatlining, her hair is falling out, tufts adhere to her pillow. Jay buys her hats. She reminds herself that Rosie isn't in Intensive Care, if her life were in danger they'd take her to Intensive Care. Another week limps by while they wait.

The worst thing is when Rosie groans and screams with pain and Jay can't help. Why can't she absorb the pain into herself, remove it from Rosie? Nothing she does seems to help, no homeopathic remedy, no visualisation, no rose quartz, no massage. She can't bear to hear Rosie scream.

'I'm going out for a walk,' she says as soon as a nurse enters.

She needs to remove herself from the room before she begins to swing her own emotions round like a monkey with a wire mother, before she smashes the room and damages Rosie. She hurries out of the hospital. Tears and snot burst from her nose and eyes, she's sobbing in the street, she strides towards Regent's Park, she has failed even to keep Rosie company.

This room smells like mango peel rotting in the bin.

Rosie's tummy hurts like somebody's twisting one of those corers that gouge the cores out of apples. She's going to vomit. She shuts her eyes and goes down the escalator. Everything is hushed and shiny like Debenhams or somewhere only quieter. The nurse hypnotherapist said it's probably dark at the bottom but Rosie's escalator swoops down into a hall of doors that shine like mirrors except she can't see her reflection in them. She opens the door into the control room and scans the switches until she finds one labelled Stomach, Nausea. She lifts the switch from On to Off. She can control her own body. She'll go for a walk to her garden. The nurse hypnotherapist called it her private garden, which made Rosie think of it as her lady-garden. She exits the control room and approaches another door, which turns into a gate with intricate designs. She can tell that the gate used to be silver even though most of the metalwork has turned brown with rust. The path that leads from the gate to the river is overgrown so that she has to avoid nettles, duck overhanging branches and twist away from brambles. She and Amma used to have a thing about brambles, like if you didn't watch out the brambles would get you. When Rosie reaches the river, it's beautiful. Roses climb the bridge and twine themselves around tree trunks. The different colours of the petals blend and curl into each other and the morning sun lights pools that look like mermaids' baths between the rocks and waterfalls splash gently into sparkling streams. What Rosie hasn't told the nurse hypnotherapist is that Joe is here, sitting on a rock, waiting for her. I've spread

my dreams under your feet, he says. Tread softly, because you tread on my dreams. But the brambles are creeping up behind her. Her stomach really hurts and she's about to throw up.

She opens her eyes. On the wall, behind her mother washing her hands for the fiftieth time today, she can see a spray of blood dried shiny and almost black. It isn't Rosie's blood. She wishes somebody would clean it off. Outside the window, rain on the brick building opposite makes it glisten like a flayed body: more specifically, like Warren's flayed body on Buffy after Willow goes queen-of-all-evil.

'I need a bowl.' Her tummy clenches. Her mouth doesn't flood with saliva because she has no saliva.

Her mother speed-walks out to the sluice. Rosie tries to stand but her drip gets tangled so she only manages to totter as far as the end of her bed before she spews her breakfast croissant. While her mother's pinching vomit into paper towels, Professor Croc sweeps in with his chorus-line of House Officer, Rosie's nurse for today, chemo nurse and assorted nameless backing dancers. They're all smoothing on plastic gloves.

'A mop, I think,' is the first thing he says.

Rosie's nurse shoots out of the room. Rosie bets she'll bounce back with a mop in record time. When he frowns at the telly, her mother turns it off.

He aims his attention towards Rosie and smiles his toothy smile. Like a crocodile, imagining how well she'd fit beneath his chin. Or Professor Drac: a consultant haematologist who's a vampire. Good way to ensure regular supplies of blood.

'How are you feeling today?' he asks.

Rosie stares back at him. How does he think she's feeling? He's destroyed her immune system with chemo and her blood, bone marrow and mucus membranes with radiation. Even if Rosie survives her transplant she'll never be able to have kids and she'll go into menopause at the age of fifteen unless she has HRT. The lining of her mouth is also demolished so when she tries to eat chocolate, which used to be her favourite pastime, it's like cowshit on a flannel. She will never get a boyfriend because, apart from one friend-like kiss on the cheek, the boy she loves keeps his distance as if cancer is catching. Professor Croc looks like one of those old white guys who think God created

them in his own image, like he's immortal, omnipotent and that other word that means you know everything. Use your imagination, she wants to say.

'Not too good,' she says.

After the medics troop out, her mother massages Rosie's feet. Someone starts shouting in the corridor.

'When I come here, I was fit! Now see how me maiger!'

It sounds like this old lady from the old people's side, who Rosie met in the patients' room.

'Dem medicine a go kill me!'

They can hear ward staff hushing her and shepherding her away.

'Sometimes I wish you'd moan more,' says her mother. 'Get it out of your system rather than squash your feelings down inside.'

'You can't shout at the nurses, though. They're only trying to make us better. Anyway, I made my decision. To totally absolutely try and get better this one time.'

Her mother pushes her thumb up Rosie's instep. The nurse saunters in with IV fluids. She rolls her eyes.

'This is supposed to be a haematology ward, not an asylum for crazy people,' she says.

Rosie hates her. She hates everybody, in spite of trying to think positive. The GCSF is making her back and all her bones feel like some fiend is slitting them open with its claws. She writhes around to try and escape the agony but it doesn't help.

'It hurts.'

'I want it to stop,' she says.

'Aargh.'

Vampires and crocodiles gnaw her back, rip her spine and crunch the bones of her pelvis.

'You can have some codeine. Don't cry, we'll soon have you better.'

The nurse writes her blood pressure on the chart. Her mother carries on with her massage but it doesn't help. Her mother goes to run a bath. She pushes Rosie in a wheelchair while Rosie drags the drip stand and when they get to the door her mother cleans the door-handle with an antiseptic wipe.

‘I’ve done the light-pull and the taps, the bath, the showerhead, the chair and the toilet. Bless you, my angel.’

Rosie takes off her beanie and passes it to her mother so her mother can shake her shed hair down the toilet. Losing her hair is the worst thing because it adds insult to injury, horror to pain. Everything hurts, even when she’s in the bath. Even the picture somebody painted on the tiles of a frog lying on its back with its arms crossed over its chest saying, I’m feeling croak, doesn’t make her smile.

‘I love you to the edge of the universe and back. You don’t have to cheer up,’ says her mother.

Rosie dissolves into sobs. Radiation has dried her up so her tears feel thick.

‘Have a good cry.’

‘I feel like I must have done something wrong... Like if I’d eaten my vegetables I wouldn’t have got ill.’

‘Studies show the only known cause of AML is massive doses of radiation.’

‘When I came in here, I was OK. But they’ve made me really ill. I want my back to stop hurting. I want my hair to stop falling out.’

She can’t say she wishes she was dead to her mother because her mother would squeeze every drop of bone marrow from her own body to make Rosie better if she could. But there are worse things than dying. At home on the mantelpiece there’s a postcard of a skeleton with a bird perched on one of its fingers and red roses blossoming from between its ribs, and the skeleton is laughing.

Her mother passes her a baby wipe to blow her nose. She turns on the shower and once she’s tested the temperature on her wrist she strokes moisturising body wash over Rosie’s back and rinses it off. Rosie wishes, for a flash, that her mother had cancer instead of her, which means she must be a really bad person. Maybe she’s changing into a mean and evil person because of her transplant, which would definitely be one of the things worse than dying.

‘Mum. Suppose my transplant changes me into somebody horrible? I Googled Can a transplant change your personality? There was this girl who had

nightmares about being murdered after she got a heart from a little girl who'd been murdered. Even though she didn't know whose heart it was.'

Her mother doesn't say, Don't be daft. She says, 'Have a good cry.'

'This other woman had a kidney transplant and totally changed. She got more aggressive, and she started to listen to classical music and read books by, I can't remember, really old-fashioned serious writers. Hey, maybe I'll want to read Shakespeare and Jane Eyre, and I'll do really well in my exams.'

For a minute it's almost funny, but she needs to tell the truth before she gets out of the water. Before she has to go back in the ward and be cheerful and do her best.

'I can't bear it.'

She splashes her face so her tears mix with the bath water.

'Of course you can't bear it,' her mother says. Awkward, trying not to knock Rosie's line or her bruises, she hugs her, even though she's all wet.

'Nobody could.'

'I can't bear it,' Rosie says again.

Four

I bounce with Amma on Zelda's bed. My bedroom is next door to Amma's and I have a big bed and we knock on the walls at night. We make a house in a cardboard box. My best dress has little dogs on it like my Granjee's dog. When it snows we have baths in the sinks in the kitchen next to the stove. We make cotton-wool snow and paper chains. The cats are soft. The horses in the field are big and you can see the world in their eyes. In the woods you can only see the deer's tails as they vanish and their footprints in the snow. We look for Heffalump tracks in the snow.

We balance eggs down the hill on spoons. The eggs fall off but they are hard boiled. I will never, ever eat a hard-boiled egg. We sit in the hammock next to the daffodils and then when it is hot we have a bath outside under the butterfly bush. We pick up sticks for the fire under the bath when we go for a walk in the woods. My mother lugs buckets of water from the spring and me and Amma carry watering cans. My mother lights a fire and you must sit on a pallet in the water and not put your feet on the enamel because it is too hot.

Zelda goes to work and we sit in the hammock with my mother. I cry when my mother says I can't have ice cream but Amma eats an ice cream. I hate them and I will kill them. If you are bad, the brambles will get you. They are as fierce as mothers and they hurt you like needles.

We blow bubbles. My mother goes away with Mel. She is on holiday and she will be back on Saturday, not today and not tomorrow. Is it tomorrow yet? Will I have to go back to hell? Will they leave me in the dark and take away my voice?

I cry. We paint pictures and Zelda tells the story of the ghost of Green End Gables: I go to the nursery of Mrs Happy and I say the treasure stays in my nappy.

Rosie sends texts to everyone as soon as she's fastened the seatbelt because she has loads of credit because you're not allowed to switch your phone on in hospital in case it interferes with the machines, like on board a plane. She's not sure how that works. Maybe they should teach it in Physics because it's something teenagers would actually be interested in.

If you have no immune system they send you home in a car, which is called hospital transport. On the way home the driver gets lost. He's wearing one of those enormous Rasta hats. Rosie has started to notice hats, although she'd rule him out because it has red, green and yellow stripes on a black background, which is a bit too bright. She does like those leather ones with peaks like her other dad used to wear. The driver is a nice guy because he stops the car in traffic without complaining when she has to throw up, but he's also insane.

When she gets home she's going to change into her black skirt, black tights, her orange top with the draped neck and her Bench jacket. Her Kangol hat over her black beanie, because she is bald. Even though she felt mad at the time, she feels pleased now that her mother made her tidy her room and put all her clothes in the wash before she went into hospital. How can Mum be so sensible and grown up about some things but she doesn't understand about people, like she can't see that talking to this guy is going to end up somewhere mental?

'I think is on this road I buy vegetable from a farm shop. Fresh and nice,' says Big Hat. 'Since me life turn around and I take Jesus into me heart, I eat more fresh produce.'

Like you couldn't see that coming.

'It does make you think about God, when you have to face illness or death,' says her mother.

Big Hat glances towards her, turning his head. Keep your eyes on the road, mate. After what she's gone through, Rosie doesn't want to die in a road traffic accident.

'Them say, If God exist, why does he let children die?'

Her mother just goes, 'Mm-hmm,' which will only encourage him.

'But I learn when pickney die, is not God, is the work of the Devil.'

Her mother flashes Rosie a help-get-me-out-of-this eye message so Rosie signals back: You got yourself into it, don't expect any help from me. She wedges her pillow up under the seatbelt, snuggles her head against it and tries to get comfortable.

She's rushing to the surface as she wakes up. The ends of her line poke into her chest. They've stopped at a roundabout. She moves the seatbelt out of the way of her line. Oh my God, that's Sainsbury's, and Toys'R'Us.

'Mum.' They are passing Chantry Park, down the hill past the turning to Mel's house. 'I'm home.' Yay! Everything is going to be all right.

Mel is round their house already and even though he hasn't put up a Welcome-Home-Rosie sign he helps to get their stuff out of the car and he's going to cook a meal. Her mother asks Big Hat in for a coffee but he says he's got to get back to London. Praise the Lord. Everything is so familiar: her mother's bike under the stairs, the weird blue swirly carpet, her teddy-bear coat hook from their old house. It's all exactly the same but also way peculiar to walk through a door without having to disinfect her hands with gel. She does wash her hands before she uses the loo, and again afterwards. It must be habit. She texts Megs that she'll be round in twenty and Feebs that Rosie and Megs will call for her, and Feebs texts back that Barbie is round hers already and they're dying to see Rosie. Even though she's a hideous mutant freak with no hair, she has a choice, which is: focus on being a hideous mutant freak with no hair, hate herself and feel too crap to leave the house and see her mates, with the result that she ends up having no hair and no friends; or remind herself they said two months in hospital but it's exactly half that so she's actually a success. Moving swiftly on, she plasters herself in slap and puts on earrings, her locket, a proper bra with metal underwiring and various other metal items which she's been forbidden to wear in hospital in case of urgently needing a scan or an X-ray.

She sets out on her own for the first time in a month. Turn left, keep going even though she can feel her heart beating, past Nasty Girl's, cross the road, past the barking dog, cross to Megs' house. Not far at all.

Megs gives her the biggest hug. ‘Yay! Ro-Ro.’ When she lets go there’s a suspicion of leakage around her beautiful greeny-grey eyes but she smiles a massive beaming smile. ‘You’ve been bare missed. Well, you are looking amazing and I see you’re wearing your shortest skirt.’

‘That’s the advantage of having a bone marrow transplant. I’ve finally lost those annoying extra kilos from my belly and hips. You don’t know how lucky you are not to have a dad who asks why you’ve forgotten to put on a skirt.’

Did Megs ever have a father? Maybe her mother got sperm from a sperm bank, or maybe she used to be married to some guy.

Today, by text, they’ve devised a master plan: see how many bonkers men will honk their horns or rev their engines when the girls wear their shortest skirts. Even before they walk through the alley all the boys on their bikes outside the shops call out sad and pathetic comments, but that hardly counts.

‘Chocolate?’ asks Megs.

‘Not so much.’ The inside of her mouth still feels like cloth rather than shiny mouth. ‘Anyway, I haven’t got any money on me.’

‘Me neither.’

As soon as they reach the main road a car hoots and a lad yells something out the window.

Megs waggles her thumb. ‘One.

‘Let Operation Is-That-a-Skirt-or-a-Bandage commence!’

‘I’d like to mention how lucky you are not to be coming into school this term as all the teachers—’

Another hoot sounds, from a van whizzing down the opposite side of the bypass.

‘Two,’ Rosie says.

Megs holds up her hand again, with her thumb and index finger extended.

‘—Well, as I was saying, all our reverend members of staff have gone into panic and overload about GCSEs and of course Mr Fag-Ash is the most panicky and mentally-challenged of them all.’

‘Speaking of tutors, I’ve got to have a home tutor, but that’s only five hours a week.’ Rosie wants to ask about Joe but even more she wants to be cool and not obsess.

Two cars hoot while they wait to cross at the lights, and when the traffic stops two more rev their engines as they cross.

‘So what movie did you see?’ Rosie asks.

‘Well, Kieron and Ali walked us home, and Ali stayed to talk to Feebs because I think he likes her, so it was me and Kieron and somehow we got onto the subject of snogging. Basically he was begging me to snog him and I ended up giving him a kiss. And then he said auf wiedersehen, walked away and fell down on the pavement. He said a kiss only got him as far as the next lamppost but a snog would see him home.’

‘Boys, eh?’

‘Well this may sound weird, but it was nice. So I’m thinking I’ve got to sort things out with Tom because it’s over.’

‘Hmm.’ Rosie has known Tom forever and he visited her in London even though she totally told him off for having a bad attitude after his party, but on the other hand she doesn’t understand boys at all and they don’t seem to put as much thought into pleasing girls as girls do into thinking about them. Maybe it’s time to change the subject.

‘Have you seen Joe?’ She can’t resist asking.

‘Ah well, no, mein kumpel, I have not seen him because basically I’ve had my eyes shut every time I’ve sat next to him in Maths. Of course that’s a lie, but he isn’t good enough for you. You need a stunning guy who loves you to inanity and back. Patrick’s always asking about you. Or what about Brian or whatever his name is, from hospital?’

Rosie can feel her brain going into overdrive to decode the message in what Megs said, like her computer when it boots up or goes into a new programme and sort of hums like it’s having a difficult time. Is Megs avoiding speaking about Joe because he’s started going out with someone else but she doesn’t want to hurt Rosie’s feelings? Her mouth is dry, her palms feel itchy and Megs is really starting to get on her nerves, like she thinks because Rosie has cancer she should go out with some boy who’s also got cancer. Usually she loves Megs more than anyone, so feeling annoyed with her must be a symptom of a personality change caused by her transplant. She doesn’t want to think about it.

They have arrived at Feebs’ house and Karen gives Rosie a hug and tells her how over the moon she is to see her out of hospital. She invites them in but

they say they need the exercise and it's a lovely afternoon and they're going to walk Rosie home. Meanwhile Feebs and Barbie are also hugging Rosie and loving her up.

'Won't you get cold because you've all got such short skirts on? Or shorts in your case, Phoebe,' says Karen. 'Phone if you get tired of walking. Don't tire Rosie out on her first day back. Rosie, you've got to come for a sleepover soon.'

Karen is so kind. After Rosie was diagnosed with leukaemia some people's parents seemed scared to have her around, but Karen kept encouraging Feebs to invite her to stay. She has a great sense of humour and she could talk for the Olympics; she makes even Feebs seem quiet in comparison.

'So how many?' Feebs asks after Karen shuts the door.

It seems like a year since she's seen them rather than three weeks since they visited her in London hospital. Not Megs so much, but Feebs and Barbie both seem suddenly grownup, glamorous and confident. Rosie isn't sure she's up for it.

'Let's walk to the park. There's a lot of traffic along there this time of day. And sway those hips. I know, we'll take turns walking in front and the others can give marks out of ten.' Feebs is so decisive.

'Well I'm not sure—' says Megs.

'It'll be a laugh,' Rosie says, along the lines of acting like she's feeling it until she starts to actually feel it.

'What are the marks for?' asks Barbie. 'I mean, like, legs, or hip-sway factor, or general appearance?'

'Or general bonkersness,' Rosie adds.

'Good question,' Feebs says. 'I reckon the marks shouldn't be for being genetically gifted, because some of us can't help being beyond gorgeous. So what we need to take into account is effort, like giving it your all and not holding back, even the shy. Hip-sway factor, absolutely. Outfit, because we have it in our power to choose. And as our best amigo here has noted, general bonkersness.'

'Amiga,' Rosie says, even though she's giving up Spanish because it's important to prioritise and Mr Fag-Ash is such a crap teacher.

'Bless you,' says Barbie.

'So, who's going first?' asks Feebs.

‘That would be me,’ says Barbie, sashaying ahead.

Feebs and Megs link arms with Rosie so she’s in the middle for once. Barbie is wearing a sensationally short minidress in a sort of ruched dark red material. Even though it’s getting chillier as evening approaches, she has her jacket slung over her shoulder. Her hair is dark and shoulder-blade length. She and Megs have both had fringes cut and Rosie wonders if she’s missed some new hair trend.

‘Can’t she get marks for her legs?’ she asks. ‘They’re so shapely, which has to owe as much to all her sports and PE work as to genetic what’s-it.’ She feels shapeless in contrast, what with hardly being able to get out of bed for the last three weeks.

‘Bare legs and trainers are a bit Essex, though?’ Megs sounds uncertain.

‘No, you’re thinking of white stilettos. I’d give her seven point five for hip sway,’ says Feebs.

Barbie lurches into a mad R&B bump and grind that involves her bazoomas and bum, which are by no means small. As they reach the main road a car loaded with lads swerves as the driver stares. Rosie starts laughing so much she nearly falls over. Maybe it’s having three older sisters that gives Barbie massive confidence tinged with a hint of recklessness.

‘Nine for booty sway,’ she says. ‘But at the risk of sounding like Mel I do have to comment that your outfit looks as though it began as a tube top pulled down to cover your bum because you forgot to put your trousers on. OK, I’ll go next.’

‘Love the baby kilt.’

Is Feebs being extra nice because she has leukaemia or because that’s what Feebs is like? Or because Rosie’s skirt is in fact so cute? She changed her mind and went with the sort-of-plaid orange and black lines on a cream background of pleats, with a black top because the orange one showed her Hickman line. She stalks towards the crossing with her head held high and places each foot on an imaginary line in front of her.

‘I’m channelling Sandra Bullock in Miss Congeniality, the bit with Mustang Sally where she struts out of the aircraft hanger after her makeover. Hey, guess what, I have an iPod now and I can download songs!’

‘What? Can’t hear!’ yells Barbie.

‘Cos you’re in front,’ adds Megs.

‘Five for hip sway,’ says Feebs.

Funnily enough her harsh judgement cheers Rosie up so much that she launches into part of the disco sequence she worked out with her group for Drama during the summer term. Step to the left, pop that hip, swing your arms left, knee bend, same to the right, circle your hips while raising your arms, click your fingers and shimmy, shimmy.

‘Three for hip sway,’ says Feebs.

They’re all laughing and falling about while they wait for the lights to change and Rosie can’t imagine anything better because it’s how life should be.

Jay checks the clock, she needs a pee, she washes her hands afterwards. The mirror above the sink shows an ugly old woman with bags under her eyes, a crooked nose and a puffy toad neck that joins her collarbone to her chin. Even though she lost weight in London because it was so difficult to obtain meals for herself in hospital, she’s hideous. She and Mel have been invited to a party this weekend but she can’t meet new people who’ll notice how hideous she is, on top of which she’ll have to tell them she’s a full-time carer for a daughter with leukaemia and deal with their reactions. When she directed videos for a living people she met at parties treated her as glamorous, when she worked in ant-racist education at least she was interesting. Now she feels as though she ought to be looking for a job, but with no immune system Rosie can’t go anywhere for six months so how can Jay leave her on her own?

‘I’ll do the washing up, and then I’m going on MSN,’ says Rosa as she finishes her bacon sarnie.

Mel passes his plate and goes back to the paper. He can tell Jay’s already read this section because the folds are out of alignment. This government didn’t deserve his vote. ‘Guess what? The official report by US weapons inspectors shows Saddam *wasn’t* stockpiling weapons of mass destruction. So Blair has to go and announce that Saddam was doing his best to break sanctions.’

‘Any more plates?’ asks Rosa, clearing.

‘Did you get yours from the front room?’

‘We should have gone on marches. Everyone slags them off but they’ve brought back a minimum wage. And Tax Credits. And funded SureStart, and the NHS,’ says Jay.

‘But they’re so right wing.’

‘Yeah, but if we had a socialist government all the rich people would shift their money to tax havens like they did when Harold Wilson or Callaghan or whoever was in. They set up foreign currency restrictions so you could only take fifty quid out of the country, which wasn’t exactly popular, which is why they only lasted five minutes before they got voted out.’

‘I thought it was the Winter of Discontent. This lot haven’t restored civil liberties. If they bring in identity cards it’ll be the worst assault on privacy since...chastity belts.’

‘What we doing today?’

‘Come outside while I have a cigarette.’ He kisses her forehead.

One of next door’s cats is scratching under his leylandii hedge. He dodges through the bead curtain, grabs the sub-machine-gun water pistol and sprays. That’ll teach it. He doesn’t light his roll-up because it’s beginning to rain.

Jay leans against the settee while he settles in front of the stove, feeling his knees creak.

‘It’s almost cold enough to light a fire. Supermarket first, and you could take your shopping home. Then I’ve got to go in to work,’ he says.

‘It’s Saturday.’

‘I’m only nipping in to fetch the festival brochure. I had to take five days off last month. I need to catch up before London. Where’s my lighter?’

‘I love seeing you all enthusiastic about the movies and the parties.’

‘It’s work,’ he reminds her. ‘I thought we could get takeout and then go to Rafi’s.’

‘Rafi’s?’

‘Party. I told you.’

‘I’ll have to see what Rosie’s doing.’

‘She could ask a couple of people round. They could get pizza.’

‘Yeah but it’s Saturday. Suppose they’re all going out?’

‘You could come for a couple of hours. She’s fifteen.’

‘Let’s see what she’s doing. I’m not going to leave her on her own on a Saturday night if her friends are all out.’

Jay’s being ridiculous. They hardly did anything all summer because of Rosa being in and out of hospital. They only saw each other in passing during September and now Jay’s at home all the time so they don’t have anything to talk about except Rosa’s bloods or Rosa’s new tutor. Hasn’t Jay got a life? He’s not going to beg her to go to Rafi’s.

He ends up going on his own. He walks because Rafi and Anneke’s new place is in the London Road and the rain has cleared up. They bought an old Victorian semi and renovated, which he and Jay could have done if she hadn’t been in such a hurry to buy after her mother left her that money. She always said she wanted to live with him, but when they finally had the opportunity she didn’t wait for him to sell his house.

He catches sight of Cara in the front room as Rafi leads him through to the kitchen to open his bottle. Jay should have come with him. She’ll only have herself to blame if. Rafi shows him around: the entire place is fabulous, with polished wood floors, solid modern furniture that somehow fits the old building and muted colours. Mel drinks Rioja, smokes cigarettes outside the back door and catches up one by one with the Drunken Ducks, so called because they used to meet once a week in the Drunken Duck pub. He slowly makes his way to the front room, where Cara is standing with a full glass next to a balding guy whose hand rests on her bum. The sight of her hooks him in the midriff. He feels hyper aware, as though he has eyes in the side of his head and is scanning fragments to assemble a picture. His impressions coalesce to inform him that her hair is pulled back in some kind of sophisticated fold, her eye makeup is very black and she’s encased in a black off-the-shoulder number that puffs out from a tight bodice. He can see she’s not wearing a bra and he finds her exceptionally enticing.

When they arrive face to face she says, ‘Mel,’ with a friendly smile.

‘Cara. You’re looking gorgeous. I didn’t expect to see you.’ His head feels hot and red. The balding guy is still glued to her side, which she can hardly find attractive.

She introduces them. He owns a gallery in Woodbridge, which Mel supposes could be useful to Cara. On the other hand Mel runs a cinema and has

loads of contacts in the distribution business. The guy has a posh accent, which for all Mel knows might be a factor in his favour, but also a bit of a pot belly. Mel's thick hair, red though it may be, and his lack of an actual beer gut count as advantages. He knows his own main charms are, one, that he genuinely likes women; and two, that he enjoys cunnilingus and is good at satisfying women in bed: both attributes surprisingly rare from what he hears. Mel makes this assessment internally while out loud he previews forthcoming attractions in the IFH programme and enquires about Cara's performances, videos and teaching work. He couldn't give a shit about whatever pretentious exhibition Baldy Arse is showing in his gallery.

'Nice meeting you. I'm going to pop outside for a smoke.' He drains his glass and turns away.

'I'll come with you.' Cara touches her hand to his arm. She detaches herself from her escort. Result.

Even though Mel is quite drunk he's careful to keep his eyes on hers, not allowing them to drift down to see whether the chilly wind has made her nipples erect. He offers her a roll-up from his tin but she shakes her head. The movement causes her to lurch a little and steady herself against the wall. She must be pissed, too. Subsiding onto the bench outside the back door, she pats the space next to her. The moon sails huge and golden above them. The wind tosses shreds of cloud across. The noise from the party provides a backing track to their conversation.

'How's your daughter?'

'She's doing really well. They said she'd be in hospital for two months but she was out in one. She's at home with her mother.' Cara doesn't need to know that she's at his home and that Jay's there too.

'I never told you...'

'What?'

'Nothing. I'm drunk.'

'Come on, you're a grown woman. Spit it out.'

She reaches inside his breast pocket for his tin. She must know how she affects him. She's as big a flirt as he is. She takes a roll-up from the tin. He lights it.

‘When I said it wasn’t working... Last year... Your... she sent me an email. I don’t know how she got my address. I thought you must have given it to her.’

‘I wouldn’t do that.’ It’s not like Jay to go prying through his things.

‘She wrote that you were still sleeping with her, and you told her she was the best... that you had the best sex ever with her.’

The way her black eyebrows slant downwards from the bridge of her nose always makes her look anxious. He’s too pissed to think. He probably did have sex with Jay, a pity fuck because he’d split up with her. He might have said that. But all he can think of right this moment is the way Cara shaves her pubes, so that he wonders how they look tonight. And whether Baldy Arse is going to find out, and whether he’ll be coming with his penis between her big breasts.

So that Mel finds himself saying, ‘That’s not true.’ Meaning there’s still a chance he might have the best sex ever with Cara, even though he’s aware that she might understand it to mean Jay was lying.

‘So, are you with anyone now?’ Her red, shiny lips drag suggestively on the filter tip.

‘Not really,’ he says. Why should he stay loyal to Jay when she’s tried to mess up his life by interfering with his relationships?

‘Shame, really, that I am.’ She smiles.

Five.

A is for Amma. Amma's mother and father shout at each other. Is it because Amma is naughty? Amma cries and I hug her. It is cold and dark and the brambles grow in through the windows and they spike us in my dreams. B is for brambles. Zelda says, Why should I order coal when Kenny doesn't bother to put petrol in the car? She says, He's out at the pub. Then he is gone for a long time and Zelda has to sell their house.

My mother and me have a car that is white. It cost a hundred and fifty pounds. C is for car. My mother drives us in the car to our new house. It takes all day. She says, We will see Mel every weekend and some days during the week. My mother can do everything, like in that poem. She cooks pancakes and she makes Christmas dinner for twelve people and she knows how to paint walls and make films and take spiders out of the bath.

I want Amma. I want to live with Mel. It is a long way and I don't know where Amma is. She has moved house too with all her dolls. D is for doll. Toubab has long fair hair but Lucy is like a real baby and I let her be Ariel even though she has no hair.

We stay at Mel's house while my mother and me paint our new house. Mel can do everything. He goes to work and he puts up shelves and he cooks Sunday dinner and reads me stories. He has a whole cinema and I watch a funny film with my mother. It is called Beethoven and it is about an enormous dog. D is for dog. I want a dog or a cat. I want Grizzle and Hag, they are soft and they purr like engines when you stroke their heads and they are warm when they sit on your knee and you can't move or they will jump off.

I have to go to a new hospital to see a new doctor and he is funny. D is for doctor.

There are no brambles in Ipswich, only a park and a cemetery. There are pavements so I can get roller skates and Mel will teach me to ride a bike. Mel finds a school. My mother walks to school with me and then I want my mother

and I cry. My teacher is called Mrs Curry and she says, Your mummy will come when the little hand is on the twelve and the big hand is on the six. We do sand and water. A boy called Tom cries more than me so I put my arms around him and say, Have a good cry. We have story time and then my mother is there but Tom says that is not his mummy, it is the lady who looks after him while his mummy is at work. I feel sorry for him. My mother says, We will have pasta for dinner. I tell her when to cross when the green man lights up, and when we are away from the main road we play Made You Look. I love my mother more than anybody because she is a honey and a sweetheart and when I grow up and marry Mel I will always keep my mother too. Amma will come and live with us and we will have a kitten.

Rosie's drowning in a black river edged with fire roaring louder than the fire a helicopter dangles a rope ladder Rosie screams and grabs for the bottom rung grinding buzz hurts her head wakes her up. The new neighbours, only they're not so new any more, are using some incredibly loud power tool that sounds like it's sawing through brick. Through the wall that divides their houses, like they're under attack. It's not even light. Rosie's new cells and her old cells work together in perfect harmony. Repeat ten times. She needs a pee.

Her mother is doing her sitting so Rosie tries to pee quietly. Should she flush? Her mother says the whole point of meditation is that even if the house blows up you can sit there breathing, so Rosie puts the lid down and flushes. Compared with the noise from next door, she can hardly hear it. She goes into her mother's room and lies on top of the duvet with her head touching her mother's leg. The noise stops. Rosie must have drifted off again because next thing her mother is leaning forward to kiss her and Rosie can tell she hasn't brushed her teeth because her breath smells a bit sour like rice that's been left out too long.

'Did you sleep OK? Drilling wake you up? I've been trying to bless them with love, but it doesn't seem to work,' her mother says.

'I sleep all the time now.'

'You could pretend to be hibernating.'

'That might have cheered me up when I was about eight.'

At least it's definitely because of the radiotherapy rather than a personality change caused by her transplant because Martha says everybody gets it and it's called somnolence.

'I'll get your meds.'

'Mum, can I have apple juice?'

Her mother keeps making lemon and ginger tea in the morning. She grates the ginger herself and says it prevents nausea but Rosie connects it with vomiting so it makes her feel sick, which she feels nearly all the time.

Back in her own bed she touches the base of her lamp twice so it comes on medium bright. When the Magic Wand people do her bedroom makeover she'll definitely keep this lamp. She could read Jane Eyre because she has to get on with her GCSE work and write an essay about social injustice in Victorian England, as shown in Jane's early experiences at Gateshead and the horrible orphanage place. Or she could search kitten care on her iBook. She plugs her laptop into the phone socket next to her bed and waits while it dials the internet connection. It's nifty and clean and white and you can see anywhere in the world on it and it is the future.

In between the little dialling tune and cars swishing past outside she can hear people talking and laughing on their way to school. She feels so left out. It feels worse than a power tool drilling into her bones or a head stuffed with dirty bandages. While Rosie's trapped underground in the dark, her mates are walking to school under umbrellas with their arms linked. They're having a laugh at Mr Fag-Ash and learning important stuff in lessons so they can make something of their lives. They are talking about boys and Saturday jobs. She found out the thing they weren't telling her, which is that Feebs has started going out with Joe, which made her feel like she never wants to see any of them again.

When the Google page comes up she finds herself typing, Does a bone marrow transplant change your personality? Maybe her bone marrow was from some really weird person and it will change Rosie into a weirdo. Except a psycho wouldn't be kind enough to donate bone marrow. She will ask Martha whether it changes you. Her new cells and her old cells work together in perfect harmony. She wants to email Angela-who-she-met-at-the-ball to ask whether she's started her research, but she feels too shy.

The answers are all about heart transplants, or heart-and-lung transplants and a few kidney transplants. All the organs are from people who died, and the person who gets the new body part turns into the person who died, or becomes more like them. There's one story about a man who got a liver from a black guy who was an archaeologist, who was working on the history of the ancient cities

of Zimbabwe, except he got killed in a road traffic accident in Milwaukee, which was his home. The man who had the liver transplant was older, a construction worker, which means a builder. He said he wasn't racist but he wasn't happy about having a transplant from a black person, which is definitely racist and also stupid, because why would it make any difference? He'd never had any black friends but after he recovered he started going to the library and reading about the history of Zimbabwe, and also inviting the African-Americans he worked with round to his house.

Her mother comes in with the medicine and warm apple juice and Rosie clicks on the little red circle with the x because her mother gets really upset about racism.

'Mum, can we get a kitten? It's the perfect time, because I'm at home all day.'

'You need to work out how much it would cost. Food, and the vet for vaccinations and everything. And you'll have to ask the doctors next week. Let me take your temperature.'

She doesn't want to ask the stupid doctors. When Dr Stuart said she couldn't get her ears pierced because of the risk of infection, her mother let her anyway and they cleaned the holes twice a day. On Feebs' birthday last month, Rosie spent the afternoon because none of them had colds or flu, but she couldn't go in the evening and she didn't complain. On Bonfire Night her mother rang London in case they'd say, It's outdoors, so any germs will blow away, but they said, You could be standing next to somebody who has chicken pox.

The thermometer beeps. Thirty-seven point five is a little bit high.

'We'll check again later. How you feeling? Want a massage? Or to do a heart meditation or something?'

'I don't want to do a heart meditation.'

'You sound very decided about that.'

'It makes me feel angry.'

She doesn't know what makes her so mad. Whether it's her mother getting inside her head when Rosie has to spend practically twenty-four seven with her anyway. Or making an effort to feel all peaceful and warm and accepting when everything is too much effort already. Or maybe because it's like something out of her Little Book of Utter Crap: feel your heart beating with love

and safety. Let your heart grow as big as the Sports and Social Club on Rushgrove Lane. Invite all your friends into your heart for a party. Make sure you have bouncers so when your mates get pissed and vomit on the dance floor, the bouncers can throw them out.

‘Can I have breakfast?’

‘You want bacon? Or just toast?’

‘Toast, please.’

If she wants to make something of her life, she ought to do some work. Jane Eyre because it’s right there on her bedside table. ‘There was no possibility of taking a walk that day,’ isn’t exactly a stunning first sentence. Rosie never wants to go for long walks. When they walk by the sea or in the country with friends, she’s always the last, going Wait for me! Her mother always waits. It’s the way it’s written: ‘humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority to Eliza, John, and Georgiana Reed.’ Reading it is like trying to translate from Spanish or German. Rosie stopped doing German in Year Nine and now she’s given up Spanish because she has to prioritise, plus her home tutor doesn’t teach Spanish. Even without Spanish and Geography she’ll still do eight GCSEs because of two English and two Science.

After she gets up she’ll force herself to finish her homework and then as a reward she’ll search kitten care or plan her new bedroom till Maria arrives. Pale plum and cream instead of lavender and blue. They’re going to turn her mother’s darkroom into a study because Rosie has to spend so much time at home. Her mother taught her to print photos but she gets too bossy when she teaches you something.

She texts everybody about the kitten, even though they won’t answer because school must have started. Megs’ mothers let her and her sister get one and it’s grown up now. It was so cute and fluffy. They really make Rosie laugh, which would be good for her immune system, plus she’d get exercise trailing a string around for it to pounce on, so her mother should be happy. She tries not to feel mad at her mother because of the whole thing with Daisy, who she named after her favourite nurse at Ipswich Hospital, who’s moved to the children’s hospice. It could be the worst thing that ever happened to her: her mother getting rid of the kitten, not Daisy moving to the hospice.

She does her mouth care and then sits in the kitchen to make a start on homework. This table shows the number of hours ten students spent watching TV and doing homework one weekend.

Her mother says, 'I'm gonna cycle up the veggie shop and Blockbuster before Maria gets here.'

'It's not right. I'm fifteen but I miss you even when you go out for half an hour.'

'It's not right that you're ill, but since you are it's all right for us to depend on each other and be together a lot.'

All of a sudden, out of the blue, Rosie loves her so much that she wants to do something that her mother would like.

'Mum. Are we going for a walk, later?'

Her mother gives her a big hug and a glass of fizzy water. 'Drink.'

She gets her bike and leaves. The chair hurts Rosie's bottom bones and her back aches when she sits up straight, plus sporadic bursts of drilling from next door are doing her head in, so she takes her work in the sitting room and lounges on the sofa. This table shows the number of hours ten students spent watching TV and doing homework one weekend. The students are called A, B, C etcetera up to J, which seems a bit generic. Aaron, Barbie, Christopher, Danielle, Ellie, Feebs, Gurinder, Hannah, I is hard. Rosie can't think of anyone from school, only Isaac. Joe.

A) Complete the dual bar chart to illustrate the data. Which means filling in bars for students D to J with grey bars for TV and white for Homework. Rosie ought to hatch the grey bars with diagonal lines using a ruler but her lap's too wobbly so she just fills them with quick squiggles.

B) The school recommends that students spend at least $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours doing homework each weekend. How many students did at least $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours homework? This seems too easy. What does Rosie have to know? That $1\frac{1}{2} = 1.5$? 7 is the answer. The table shows that the students who spent most hours watching telly, like five hours, did the least homework, like half an hour, whereas in real life Rosie has often watched telly for five or six hours and also done homework for at least five hours a weekend. Not that she's timed herself.

The statistical representation questions aren't too bad but when she moves on to arranging data she feels flummoxed. She thought a polygon was like

a hexagon with more sides. She's forgotten, or maybe she was away when they did it. Fuck knows. Fuck nose. She misses Miss Kirkpatrick, who never gets mad if you don't understand. Maria seems lovely but Rosie isn't used to her. Moving quickly on. The histogram shows the weights of 50 members of a sports club. Calculate the mean weight. Weight is mean. Rosie has started to put on weight. How come people have been nagging her to eat all her life in spite of that saying, You can never be too rich or too thin? She shuts her eyes for a couple of seconds.

She feels a sudden shiver and when she opens them there's a, not exactly a person and not a stranger standing there. Like somebody she's known all her life only she can't really see him properly. When she looks straight at him it's like looking out of the corner of her eye, or on telly where they have to disguise people's identity for legal reasons so they cover their faces with sort of transparent out-of-focus dandelion clocks. And he's not even a he, except his voice is definitely deep and echoey.

'Come with me,' he says.

'No.' It's dark enough already, let alone where he wants to go.

He sweeps his arm, draped in some kind of black sleeve, to one side. A black-and-white board with chess pieces appears like a dream, except she knows she isn't asleep.

'Play against me. If you win, you stay here. If I win, you go with me.'

'No. I can't play chess. I forget the moves.'

Another sweep transforms the chess set into a game of Cluedo. Mr Darkness, in the sitting room, with the board game.

'No. Even if you win, I'm not going with you. Because when I set my mind to something, I don't give up. I'm going to get better and get on with my life. I don't let anything else take over and I don't take chances. That's why I didn't go to the fireworks, and when my mates ask if I'm going to the Steamboat with them, I say no, even though I want to go.'

'I see.'

He sounds unsure now that Rosie's arguing with him, and a bit surprised. Rosie still can't see his face.

'I want to do something normal. I'm doing my homework. You can sit down if you're tired.'

Rosie opens the book, which seems all wrong, like it's incredibly heavy and covered in tatty old leather. But the problems are easy so she starts to answer them, writing with a feather pen dipped in dark red ink even though she has a suspicion that's not what she was using before.

Un Dimanche à la Compagne. Mel needs to practise his French before the Europa conference at the end of the month. Sunday at the seaside. Un dimanche au bord de la mer pendant le mois de novembre. Or maybe au mois de Novembre?

'You seeing anyone today?' he asks at breakfast.

Rosa shrugs.

'Do you good to get out.'

It hurts his chest the way she looks so skinny and wan in her hat and PJs. If they hadn't been so careful about fractionating the dose, her skin would have burned and peeled off. Her rash could be radiation sickness or graft versus host disease. His wrist itches.

Jay gives him a look.

'We could all go to Bawdsey, make a fire,' he says.

'OK.' Rosa doesn't sound enthusiastic.

Jay kisses his neck and fetches more juice from the kitchen. 'You could roast marshmallows.'

'We haven't got any. I could make dough for dampers, like when we were at Zelda's. Mel's got Golden Syrup.'

'Have a domperidone so you won't get carsick,' says Jay.

None of them can stay in tune but they sing in the car: By the rivers of Babylon, Hello Tosh got a Toshiba, except no-one can remember the words, and Somewhere over the rainbow.

'Sing I'm putting all my eggs in one basket,' says Rosa.

'I can't.' Although it's less obvious when they all sing together, hearing his voice on its own makes him cringe.

'Which car was your favourite?' Jay asks from the back, where she's sitting because Rosa is less likely to feel sick in the front.

'Please, Mel,' says Rosa.

‘The Audi was brilliant on motorways but it hated pottering round town. Let’s play that game where you have to guess the tune,’ says Jay.

‘Any tune, or musicals?’ asks Rosa. She begins to dee dee.

He needs to concentrate at a roundabout. The sun flares in his rear mirror.

‘The hills are alive with the sound of music?’

‘Right. Your turn.’

‘Dee de-de-de-dee, dee dee de-de-de-dee, de dee dee dee de-de, de dee de-de dee.’ Jay leans forward between the seats.

‘Singing in the rain,’ he says.

‘I can’t believe you never used to like musicals,’ says Rosa. ‘Mel’s turn.’

‘I wanted a movie to carry me away into another world, so I could actually believe it was real,’ says Jay. ‘When they all burst into song it was like, what the fuck?’

It has to be something from Top Hat. The magic that was Fred Astaire: can’t sing, can’t act, balding, can dance a little. In spite of his enormous ears and bad chin line, his charm is so tremendous that it comes through even on this wretched test, they wrote in the report on his first screen test.

‘Duh-duh, da-da duh-duh, da da dah da dah da dah...’ Too high for him. He clears his throat.

‘Are we nearly there?’ Rosa sounds a bit shaky.

‘You OK darlin? ‘Tell you what, when we get off the road, you can drive along the track and park the car.’

They always make a fire on the sand beach that borders the mouth of the river. Jay leads Rosa for a wander across the marsh while Mel forages for rotten wood in the copse over the road. He breaks off a few shoots of willow for damper sticks, piles his firewood next to one of the concrete blocks and perches on it to wait. Cold through his jeans. The wind smells of rotting seaweed. He rolls a cigarette and smokes it. Moored boats face the tide as it rushes into the estuary. Clouds float high above but the sun is shining. He can hear their voices, coming back.

‘Pick some if you want, Mum.’

‘Nah, it’s too late in the year, it’d be tough.’

Jay looks like, no, Jay is a nondescript middle-aged woman with a long nose who sneaked around in his Inbox and sent a message to the woman he was

having a relationship with. She used to resemble Rossy de Palma but now her hair is chopped into a bob that makes her look conventional. She believes she's so honest and transparent but what else has she omitted to mention? Think positive. She loves him, and she's going through an extremely difficult time. Focus on making things easier for her, and on his trip to Paris: the screenings, the parties, eating out.

Deuxième dimanche is like Groundhog Day, with Mel in the role of Bill Murray, condemned to repeat the same actions over and over.

On Sunday morning they're drinking tea in bed when Jay says, 'I don't know if she's depressed.'

Why wouldn't she be depressed? She has leukaemia and radiation sickness. He doesn't say it out loud.

'It turns out they were all round at Barbie's house. Barbie is supposed to be one of Rosie's best friends. Think how hurtful that would be.'

Apart from Phoebe, Megan and Bonita, he can't distinguish between Rosa's mates, a bunch of giggly girls who wear hideous hipster jeans and too much makeup. He doesn't understand girls. Why didn't Rosa simply ask what they were up to? How does Jay know?

'Maybe one of them had a cold.'

'If everyone's busy today, can we take her out again?'

He could do with a day to read the paper, change the washer in the kitchen tap and generally chill. But Rosa was so happy when they went to Bawdsey; it was like taking her out when she was eight or nine.

'Let's see how it goes. After The Archers.'

'About next weekend. You know you're going to Paris?'

Of course he knows he's going to Paris. But sarcasm is the lowest form of wit.

'The Magic Wand people say that's the weekend they can do Rosie's bedroom and turn the darkroom into a study. Maybe if you're back on the Monday, you could take her to London hospital? They've booked a limo. I could help finish the room makeover. And also, can me and Rosie stay round here next weekend so it's a surprise?'

'Of course you can'

He considers the arrangements while he makes another cup of tea and smokes a cigarette outside. It's one of those damp, cold grey days. Leaves are blowing off the silver birch. Setting priorities involves a process like arranging staff rotas or film screenings on a spreadsheet. Don't think about staff rotas.

'It would be best if I don't go. I can cancel the accommodation and claw back the fare,' he tells Jay when she comes down.

'Would you miss anything vital?'

'Mainly sessions on digital cinema, but I can catch up.'

Pointless to practise his French any more. He was looking forward to Paris but Rosa comes first. He wishes Jay would appreciate his sacrifice. When he goes downstairs after the omnibus edition of *The Archers*, Rosa's wilting on the settee again.

'Tell you what,' he says. 'Get dressed and we'll go to Felixstowe. They've got space heaters outside the Alex. We can walk and then have lunch.'

'I feel sick,' Rosa says on the dual carriageway.

Jay leans forward. 'You took your ondansetron, right? I should have made ginger tea.'

'Want to stop?' he asks. 'It's not far.'

He finds a space by the promenade. Rosa shoves the door open and hangs her head over her knees.

'You'll feel better in the fresh air.'

Jay helps her out of the car and they totter towards the beach. Mel buys a parking ticket.

Rosa bends at the waist. She vomits in a violent rush onto the tarmac. At least the day is so cold and grey that there's hardly anyone around to humiliate her by staring.

Every day during November a white fog creeps up from the docks and presses round the house. Every day Jay has to trap spiders or crane flies in a glass, she shakes them out of the window because they threaten Rosie's peace of mind. The gaps between the darkness of early morning and the darkness of dusk shrink smaller. The white cold reminds Jay of a nightmare she used to have as a child, she and her mother and sister huddled on an iceberg, her father was already

drifting into the freezing fog on another iceberg. The ice where Jay was standing would break away from the ice with her mother and sister on it, the current would carry her away from her family, she called out but neither of them could hear. Her mother told the children their father had to go away, Jay believed he didn't love them because how could he disappear if he loved them? She was in her twenties when she found out that he'd died suddenly, of a heart attack, their mother was convinced that telling the truth would be too traumatic for children under ten. Jay still gets confused sometimes, in her memories: she thinks her father left rather than died, she gets mixed up between people going away and dying.

Every day turns into a repetition of the day before, the sun lurches above the horizon and drags fog from the estuary, every day Jay counts out Rosie's medicines: a drug to suppress her immune system and prevent graft-versus-host disease, a drug to protect her kidneys against the drug that prevents GVHD, an antibiotic, an antiviral, an antifungal, an anti-emetic, hormone replacement therapy.

Every Monday a hospital transport driver drives them to London, Rosie has a blood test, she waits for the results, a doctor interprets the levels in Rosie's blood, they come home and that is the end of the day. Every Thursday they attend the paediatric oncology clinic at Ipswich Hospital.

Rosie seems to be growing younger. She's so ill that she can hardly walk, she sleeps for twelve hours a night and two hours in the afternoon like a nine-month-old baby. The neighbours are remodelling their house, they bang and drill day seven is the morning and wake Rosie up when she's exhausted. Jay tries to bless them with love, it's a good way to deal with conflict, Rosie writes a letter telling them how ill she is and begging them not to start before nine but they ignore it. Everything seems dark, with occasional shafts of light, Rosie's trapped underground in the noisy dark, Jay can't dig her out, all she can do is to make the hole in the ground safe and comfortable.

She sticks tiles down with Superglue when they peel up in the kitchen. She wakes at night to check on Rosie. One night she gets up to dose her with cough mixture and bangs on the wall with the camping mallet. After that the neighbours wait until half eight or nine before they start banging and drilling.

Rosie needs care twenty-four seven, she only feels safe and comfortable with Jay or Mel so Jay only goes out for more than an hour when Mel can keep her company. She tries to do something for herself once a week but one evening when she's arranged to meet Vonnelle for a drink, something comes up at Mel's work and after that it hardly seems worth making the effort.

Rosie needs care twenty-four seven, Jay cooks treats to tempt her appetite, reminds her to drink, counts out her medicines, washes her clothes and bed linen every day, encourages her to ask her friends round as long as they don't have colds, persuades her to walk as far as the corner, rents videos and cuddles her on the sofa while she watches them.

One afternoon she cycles to Blockbuster and rents a DVD because a quote on the cover, which shows a dark-haired girl and a handsome boy, says it's the teen movie of the year. Rosie's made cheese straws while she was out, they settle down to watch, the movie has too many medium shots and too many dissolves and the script is lame, pink-cardie girl and wild boy get together and he names a star after her. At least half way through, in fact a hundred and eight minutes by the counter, because Jay is so shocked that she checks, nerdy girl says the relationship won't work because she has leukaemia and she's dying. What a wonderful film to choose for someone who has leukaemia. Jay refuses to go anywhere near the idea of anyone dying of leukaemia, to the point where she almost sympathises with ex-colleagues who cross the road to avoid her because her daughter has cancer. She will not permit death as an outcome. The actor who plays the girl has hair at least a foot long, which would take at least two years to grow. How come she's not bald from the treatments?

She seizes the remote and presses Pause.

'I'm so sorry. I'm the worst mother in the world. I didn't know it was about someone who has leukaemia and dies. Or maybe she won't die.'

Rosie tries to get hold of the remote. Jay grips it. They tussle for possession and start laughing.

'I want to watch it.' Rosie grabs the remote and presses Play.

'I want to keep it and watch it again,' she says afterwards. 'I'm not going to die. I'm going to drink two litres of water a day and dance and go for walks and do weights at home so I'm really fit when I go back to school. I'm going to download that song Dancing in the Moonlight and put it on my iPod.'

‘Don’t tell your friends I got a video about someone who has leukaemia and dies. I don’t want everyone to think I’m a crap mother.’

The thing that annoys Jay most about the movie is how serene all the characters are, the way the crisis brings out the best in the young woman, her father, her boyfriend and so on. They don’t end up having shouting matches about the best recipe for pasta sauce to tempt the sick teenager’s appetite, as she and Mel have begun to do.

Six.

Now I am five years old, which is old enough to look after a kitten. We get a kitten and my mother says I will have to feed it and clean out its litter tray. The kitten has been rescued and it has fleas. My mother doesn't want to spray it in case the spray poisons me. She puffs powder on the kitten and combs her fur.

She is called Daisy, which is the name of the most beautiful nurse at the hospital, who has fair hair like a princess. I show her where to put the needle when I have a blood test. She lets me stick the tape on after.

Daisy is not allowed to go outside because she hasn't had her vaccinations. My mother argued with the doctor about my vaccinations because they hurt my arm. My arm went big and red and I had to have medicine.

Daisy does a wee in her litter tray. It is like little grey stones but they are soft. Her poo is quite hard and smells worse than anything. She eats food out of a tin that doesn't smell very nice or out of a packet. She is really soft and cute, only her claws are sharp but they don't stick right in, not like needles. She is all black except she has white paws and a white bib and her chin is white. Her fur is black like the colour black, not like me, even though a girl at school said, You can't play because you're black. My mother said, That's not right, and she came to see my teacher so my teacher can explain to the girl.

Daisy likes to pounce at anything that moves. My mother says she is practising to catch things to eat, like mice or birds. I don't care if Daisy eats mice or birds because I love her best of all. I tie a piece of paper to a string and pull it round the floor and she chases it. She is so funny. She is little. I can carry her and play with her every day after school. At weekends she has to come to Mel's. When she gets bigger she can play outside but she has to stay in at night because we got her from the shelter.

It is summer and the fleas get in the carpet. Daisy climbs the curtains and jumps on top of the telly. She makes us laugh.

I get blisters on my legs.

We can't go to stay with Zelda and Amma because we need to look after the kitten. My mother says maybe my blisters are because of the fleas. Dr Stuart says he doesn't know. My mother says we have to give the kitten back. I hate my mother and I will kill her when I am big and then she will be sorry. She will be dead and I will marry Mel and he will make me cheese on toast and give me chocolate buttons and we will have tickle time. We will have a kitten and that will teach my mother for saying, No.

Jay has Rosie's laptop plugged in to the phone socket in the kitchen, she ought to be looking at job sites because Rosie is better but instead she types GVHD and clicks on Search Images. Most of the pictures show terrible red rashes on the soles of someone's feet or on a baby's torso, above the nappy line. Why would a rash only appear above the nappy? She doesn't want to look. She wants an image that will explain graft-versus-host disease, she clicks on various schemata but they resist interpretation, she clicks on a microscope slide that shows pinkish blobs surrounding smaller purple blobs, dotted with tiny black ovals. Photos of enlarged cells possess a fascinating authority because they're scientifically correct, although of course the cells must have been stained. She remembers Rosie at the beach saying, Purple for serious illness. The slide has three labels that include, Apoptotic keratinocytes accompanied by lymphocytes.

Lymphocytes are a kind of white cell but she needs to fetch the dictionary for apoptotic, which means pertaining to the death of cells that happens as a normal part of an organism's development. Keratinocyte means an epidermal cell which produces keratin, the fibrous protein that forms hair, feathers, claws and so on. Does that mean the graft lymphocytes are attacking the host's skin cells? Although her uncertainty about what the picture is showing remains, she decides to print it out in Rosie's study to add to her collection. She's trying to convince herself that no longer having a darkroom has liberated her into colour. She needs a digital SLR.

She goes back to the Google page and searches images for chimerism. The dictionary defines chimera as either a female monster with a lion's head, a goat's body and the tail of a snake or an illusion that's impossible to achieve. Chimerism occurs when two kinds of DNA exist in the same person, for instance it can mean that someone has XX and XY chromosomes at the same time, which would make it hard to assign gender, it also calls into question the belief that every cell of a person's body contains the same unique DNA pattern, a belief on

which legal evidence that uses DNA traces is based. Jay has started trying to find out about it because of Rosie's worries that her transplant will change her character. The hospital still hasn't got Rosie's chimerism report back, Jay assumes it has something to do with her blood type having become unstable. She doesn't understand it but she knows Rosie is neither a monster nor an unattainable dream.

Rosie slides an arm around her neck, making her jump. She thought she was upstairs getting ready to go out. There was something she meant to ask.

'Why can't you put the lids back on the shampoo and shower gel?'

Rosie kisses the top of her head.

'You only have to take them off again next day. It's a waste of effort,' she explains. 'Where's Mel?'

'He's gone to get his stepladder so I can cut the hedge.'

'Look, Mum.'

Rosie points to her tap shoes but Jay tries to discern her emotional state. Rosie glimmers with soft colours like those on a pigeon's breast, like the Northern Lights when they watched them from the back of Zelda's house. The consultant said she can go back to school, eat out in a restaurant and spend time with her friends, although she should still avoid people with colds or other viruses.

'Me and Barbie worked out a routine in the changing room.'

'Don't kick the edges of the tiles.'

Rosie starts to sing Dancing Queen, she shuffles, taps and spreads her arms into wings.

'That's fabberony,' Jay says.

Rosie subsides onto a chair, out of breath.

'I'm going to put some music on.'

She drags Jay into the sitting room. Whitney Houston's voice, a cappella for the first couple of lines, turns each syllable into about ten. Violins play a slushy melody, the other instruments join in together with a mechanised drumbeat. Rosie and Jay sway on their feet, wave their arms and sing the chorus, out of tune, gazing into each other's eyes. They collapse onto the sofa, laughing.

‘That’s what we do at sleepovers. People disrespect teenagers but we don’t have to get drunk or take drugs. We play the Sex and the City soundtrack really loud and dance and have a laugh.’

Her brown eyes. Pimples of rash edge her open mouth. Her lips are chapped. She smells of coconut perfume and cooked-meat sweat. She is getting better. Everything’s going to be all right.

Mel turns up with the stepladder. Even though it’s supposed to be spring it’s cold enough to need a coat and scarf outside. Mel holds the ladder steady while Jay stands on top and reaches the shears to chop overgrown shoots, it feels wobbly, she climbs down to the third-from-top step. He nudges his head under her bum.

‘Is this a better way to support you?’ His voice comes out muffled.

She cracks up. His head feels hard and warm. She gets partly turned on when he bites at her thigh through her jeans but also partly embarrassed in case her arse is too big: not too big in an absolute way, but characters on TV are always making derogatory remarks about the size of women’s bottoms.

Rosie comes out wearing a white angora cap with a peak, hoop earrings and makeup.

‘God, you two. Right, I’m off to meet Megan from work and we might go into town, but I’ll wait outside the shops if they’re crowded.’

‘Don’t you need a coat?’

‘Mum. I’m wearing my thick cardie.’

‘We’re staying round Mel’s. Give us a ring if you want a lift.’

Jay climbs down to move the ladder. After she kisses Rosie goodbye, she ends up pulling Mel into a clinch, he smells of fabric conditioner and cigarette smoke, she drops the shears on the gravel.

‘So,’ she asks, ‘want to go on holiday to Spain?’

‘I don’t know if I can afford it, love.’

‘You’ve got to come. We haven’t hardly spent any money all winter, we’ll pay for it somehow.’

He doesn’t reply.

‘Let’s celebrate Rosie’s good news.’

She feels so happy that she wants to make him happy. She'll give him a massage, which is bound to turn into something more: sex is what they both like best.

As Mel locks his bike at the station he sees Bruce, the relief projectionist. He hopes Kev's going to turn up in time for the train, although the older guy isn't too keen on digital.

Bruce, bounds up, nerdily enthusiastic about getting paid for a day trip to London even though he'll have to be back in time to project Melinda and Melinda and Only Human. His copper locks are bundled into a ponytail; he's always trying to bond with Mel round the whole red-haired geek thing.

'Cool bike.'

'You seen Kev?'

He's inside, buying a copy of the Daily Fascist in WH Smith. Mel gets a latte from the kiosk. When he sits opposite Kev on the train he wishes the headlines were too blurred to read without his glasses: OOH, YOUR MAJESTY! followed by CLONED BABY WITH TWO MOTHERS.

'Is that a human baby? Kev?' Probably another sheep.

'What?'

'On the front page.'

Kev folds the paper, pushes his glasses up his nose and stares as though he didn't notice the article before.

'Bloke from Life says it's an unacceptable step towards the creation of designer babies,' he says.

'Give it here a minute.'

Mel rests his cup on the little shelf that sticks out under the window. Bruce reads over his shoulder.

'Kev. For one thing, it says no actual babies will result from this stage of the research. But, more important you'd think, it aims to prevent mothers from passing certain disabling genetic diseases to their unborn children. Also, there is a father.'

Kev merely grunts and reaches for his newspaper. Jay said the gorgeous consultant at UCLH told her researchers are trying to engineer cells that will

recognise and destroy leukaemia cells. Although Mel feels hostile to the notion of genetically-mutated foodstuffs, he'd welcome anything that might save Rosa.

Cloning pops up in his mind again when they're in the projection booth at the Odeon, before the press show. The projectionist, Erroll, is another nerd. A nerd with a beard, and more locks, black this time with that self-adhesive quality of what Jay calls African hair, which look so much more fabulous than the matted tangle of White-boy dreads. Mel feels affection for the techno-geek world behind the scenes where nobody ever has to wear a tie. What is it with ties? A tie isn't even an article of clothing but rather a restrictive status symbol to show submission to a role in which you may not breathe freely. People who believe bondage gear is pervy think nothing of strangling themselves every day with a poly-blend elongated kite. Wearing a tie is the opposite of naturism. Lonnie probably wears a tie in bed to remind his wife never to have sex with him. Mel hasn't worn a tie since he left school.

As Erroll introduces them to the digital projector, Kev tugs a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and wipes his forehead.

'They wanted dual host SCSI interfaces with no more than a two-RU form factor. It's a 2K projector, what projects images with two thousand and forty-eight pixels of horizontal resolution, innit? Pure clarity. They send the film on a portable hard drive, what we upload onto our server. Ads and trailers on a 35mm reel and then we switch over to digital for the feature.

'This is the film.' Erroll opens a black plastic case lined with grey foam. 'About a hundred gigs compressed from a one-terabyte file.'

'It's my ideal lunch box in stylish black,' says Mel.

He wants to set Kev at ease. Kev is a wizard with mechanical projectors; he's been working with them for forty years. When anything goes wrong he can strip one down, diagnose the fault and make repairs.

The hard drive is a grey metal case with USB ports like any external hard drive you could buy in the shops; it has small hexagonal vents with the circuit boards underneath and Do NOT dismantle this drive printed in red on the other side.

‘We been screening digital for five years, but we used to download by satellite straight onto the projector. That needed eighteen hours’ continuous connection.’

While he talks, Erroll demonstrates snapping the hard drive into a metal casing and then removing it.

‘So, like in 1999 everybody thought it would be all digital by now. The older guys hadn’t a clue and guys in their thirties worried they’d be out of a job. But it never ’appen yet.’

Why are they always guys? How come Mel knows hardly any women projectionists? They return to the projection booth, where Erroll peers through into the cinema.

‘I got to wait for him to stop talking.’

Mel knows the manager from years ago in Brighton. When the guy climbs down off the stage, Erroll dims the lights and presses a button on the projector. No reels or platters, no gates or sprockets, nothing except some blue lights on the side and there you go.

‘I checked the sound levels before.’

‘This is going to make your job easier,’ Mel says.

Mel doesn’t want Kev off sick with stress, not just because it would mess up his budget but also because it’s only a job, after all. Mel isn’t a bully, not like Lonnie. Bruce looks relaxed; he’s pretty quiet most of the time. Probably smokes a spliff before work.

Erroll gives Kev a sympathetic glance.

‘Too right, mate. No picture degradation, no splices, no scratches.’

‘Basically, it’s a clone, not a copy,’ says Mel.

Maybe a simulacrum. Whatever constitutes equivalence to the original. No more reproductions. When he did Media Studies, he read Walter Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.’ He’s remembered parts of it from twenty years ago because Benjamin, pronounced Benyameen by the lecturer, quoted that guy who called movies a pastime for uneducated, wretched, worn-out peasants with no intelligence. He further defined a movie as a spectacle that arouses no hope other than the ridiculous desire to someday become a star in Hollywood. Jay reckons that you remember best what you passionately love or hate, which Mel would agree with in this case. The guy, whose name Mel can’t

even remember, was sneering at Mel's mother, who took him and his brother to watch One Hundred and One Dalmatians, The Sword in the Stone, My Fair Lady, Mary Poppins and a re-release of Mel's all-time favourite, the one that gave him a lifelong crush on Judy Garland, The Wizard of Oz. Post-war Shoreham must have been as grey as Kansas but the movies could transport you into a world where odd-looking people like the Scarecrow and the Tin Man could skip along arm in arm with gorgeous Judy in her ruby slippers. Mel desired a brain, a heart and Judy in his arms, but never to be a Hollywood star. The screening would include a newsreel and a double feature, or, if it was a kids' movie, a cartoon, a wildlife documentary and the feature. Half way through, two women with trays appeared, one in front of the screen and the other near the exit; people queued for a wafer sandwich or a lolly. Mel passionately desired one of those plastic cups of Kia-Ora with the tinfoil lids but his mum always brought banana sandwiches and a flask of tea. There will now be a short intermission. During the feature she passed round jam tarts from his Auntie Nora, who worked at the jam factory, which smelled better than the soap factory where his mum grafted till she had kids. Later on he and Siouxsie would get in free to the children's matinees because her mother worked at the Rex, but it was never the same. Lads used to climb the seats and chuck drink cartons around. They hurled those words beginning with g at Mel, so that the occasion was hardly a distraction from real life. When he passed his Eleven Plus, his parents asked what he wanted for a treat. They all went to see Jungle Book and out came the banana sandwiches half way through.

'So, Essex you're from,' says Erroll. 'You goin' digital?'

'Suffolk, bit further east than Essex. We weren't selected in the first round for the UK Digital Network, but now a couple have dropped out so they're going to set us up with a server and projector. Probably not for at least a year. Thanks for this.'

'No problem. You should go in and watch. Check the quality.'

'All right to nip in and out? We're going to get a bite to eat and head home before rush hour.'

He picks up his black suede jacket and fishes in the pocket for his glasses so he can see the screen.

At Liverpool Street on the way home he's not wearing them but even so manages to recognise Cara's shape as she approaches on the concourse. Maybe her gait: he's read somewhere that the way someone walks is less amenable to disguise than the arrangement of their facial features. She looks thinner than last time he saw her. Close up, she looks tired. He introduces her to the others, reminding Kev that he probably met her when she taught the course on Film Art. Kev's expression turns hostile while Bruce appears simultaneously impressed that Mel is hugging and kissing a curvy woman in a shift dress and heels and also glazed over in the way nerdy guys get around sexy women. Because she is sexy, trailing that aura Jay no longer gives off. Which must be what makes Kev frown. As he takes a seat on the train opposite Mel and Cara, he crosses his arms and legs.

'A block of teaching at that school.' Cara explains her London visit and her exhaustion.

Mel finds it hilarious that she teaches Art in a girls' grammar school; he imagines it being stuffy and straight laced. She can hardly give seminars on her own work, which includes performances called Primal Seen, where the audience is invited to peer through a spyhole at Cara in a baby doll nightie, lying on a hotel bed.

'Went to a show of this guy's work today, Bailey Fransaise. One of his photo pieces is like the Eye of Sauron, you know, in the Lord of the Rings posters? Except it looks exactly like a vagina, and the text on the photo reads, We are afraid the vagina watches us. In Latin.'

She laughs into his eyes. She looks glamorous even though she's not wearing makeup.

'I can see how that would appeal to you.'

'But Latin! What's that about? One in English quotes Hendrix.'

Jay loves Hendrix. Maybe Cara sees Jay in his eyes because she seems vulnerable for a second. She glances down at her laptop on the table. He feels nostalgia for the months when he used to insert coded messages into his brochure copy for her to decipher.

'You should come to my performance at the quayside. It's at the I-Centre, used to be St Agnes Church. Fourteenth of April,' she says.

'What's your performance?'

‘You’ll have to come along and see. It’s called The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors. In a spectacle that involves clingfilm and belies my inner fragility,’ she adds as if sending herself up.

‘I don’t believe in marriage, or brides. I hope it’s more Rita Hayworth than Kathy Bates.’

‘Turn up and find out. I’ll email the time.’

A lot of Cara’s work is concerned with the disparity between superficial glamour and the hidden reality of mental illness. She’s neither uncomplicated nor uninteresting; Jay would like her if she got to know her. When she asks about the Film House, she actually listens to his reply and draws him out. She promises to sign up all her local contacts to the Friends of IFH. These days Jay and Rosa both seem immersed in what’s going on for Rosa, as if nothing else exists.

Warmth radiates from Cara’s skin. Her eyes shine bronze; a faint bruising of the skin around them bestows an attractive vulnerability. He becomes aware of his own physical presence. For the first time in ages, he can imagine himself in a movie: more Body Heat than Strangers on a Train. He’s a character ineluctably drawn into steamy lust and intrigue leavened with humour. Cara has something about her of a younger Kathleen Turner, who for a while figured as Mel’s number-one sexiest actor before she aged into aged into roles such as Serial Mom.

He can’t resist asking. They’re pulling out of Manningtree, crossing the estuary. The journey has sped by. The afternoon sun spotlights Cara’s hair and edges her cheek.

‘You still with what’s-his-name?’

‘What’s-his-name?’ She returns a mocking look. ‘No, I’m not. You still with what’s-her-name?’

He feels unsure how to answer.

‘Let me know.’

‘You sent me your new number but I lost it,’ he blurts.

Rosie can’t believe she’s been back at school since Easter and now she is actually getting ready for her Year 11 Prom. She shaves her legs and armpits in

the bath without cutting herself once. Her hair is straightened with cornrows plaited into one side and looks about as good as ridiculously short hair can look. She moisturises with FCUK as well as E45 cream and plucks her eyebrows. She applies base coat to her toenails and fingernails and allows drying time between coats. She crosses all these items off her list. All that's left is **brush teeth**, **makeup (EYELASHES!)** and **perfume**. Put on Jamelia, Club Hoppin', get in the mood. She finds herself writing **AARON FLECKER** on her list and adding up his numbers. He's a one while Rosie is an eight. In her study, she logs onto the numerology site to check how compatible they are. It says, Materialistic combination, compatible. Materialistic doesn't sound that nice. She'd prefer Soul Mates or Extremely Compatible, so she tries adding up first Rosie and then Aaron, which are the names they use every day, except that way she's a three and he's a four which is Incompatible. He must have some middle name that makes him add up to a five, a six or an eight, which are the best ones. God, she's wasted twenty minutes. She needs to do her makeup and get dressed.

After everybody's parents have snapped photos liked crazed paparazzi, the girls drive around a bit in their rented fire-engine-with-built-in-disco so that they arrive a bit late, which is kind of surprising as Rosie's the sort of person who normally arrives early. They nip to the Ladies to check their makeup and then Katie and a couple of people have kept seats for them. Joe is at the boys' table and he kisses Feebs because they've been going out since last year which is really hurtful and annoying, but Rosie has got over it, partly because Feebs bothered to tell her and say she'd stop seeing him if Rosie felt too upset but mostly because Rosie needs her mates so much that she can't afford to be pissed off with them. Kieron isn't there and Rosie looks at Megs and wonders, but she hasn't said anything. They all jostle to sit down and then Megs is still standing there.

Rosie feels really pissed off because there are no seats left and nobody will move so she goes, 'Look, there's Tom, let's go and sit with him,' because Megs and Tom are good mates now.

Tom waves and beckons. Rosie and Megs go over and she honestly didn't see that Tom is at the same table with Aaron, which is kind of like a reward for good behaviour and she knows it's all going to come out all right, like

in that episode of Buffy after Angel splits up with her when she says she's going to make sure Willow and Xander and everyone have the perfect prom. When Buffy has killed the hounds of hell and she's standing like a dweeb with Giles while all the other kids are clinched in slow dances, Angel appears at the edge of the dance-floor, walks slowly towards Buffy through the crowd and pulls her into his arms.

Right now Tom pulls Rosie into his arms for a massive hug.

'Sup, Rose-is-a-rose?' asks Aaron.

Don't be all shy. Answer quickly! Don't go red!

'Hey, we've made it through high school!'

Why did she say that? Why? He called her Rose-is-a-rose which is a quotation from something but also sort of affectionate. She really likes him because he's interesting but also kind, like the time that Year Seven boy broke his wrist and Aaron took him to the school nurse.

He says, 'Word up.'

Why do boys do that? All, Word up, Bare mileage, Nuff love, bruv? Lots of it is stuff Jamaican people like Isaac say, or used to say. People expect Rosie to be down with the athletics and the singing and dancing because of what she looks like, and when she met one of her cousins on Isaac's side in London he was all street but Rosie isn't like that.

'Love your sash,' she says to Tom. It matches his bow tie and it's blue and silky.

'It's not a sash, it's a cummerbund,' says Megs.

'Cummerbund,' says Tom.

Aaron is wearing a white collarless shirt with a waistcoat that's got different colours but really subtly, over black trousers. He looks smart but normal, not all trussed up like the boys in suits and bow ties. The table has a white cloth, cutlery and glasses neatly arranged next to side-plates, with gold helium balloons for the centrepiece and it's so obvious what the lads are going to do with the balloons. She casually sits next to Aaron, with Tom on her other side and Megs next to him.

After they eat, the boys untie the balloons and jostle for who gets possession so they can suck in helium and talk in squeaky voices.

Aaron sucks and Rosie goes, 'Practise one of the songs you're going to sing later.'

'I don't sing.' It comes out in a squeaky cartoon voice and they all crack up. He takes another hit and sings, 'I've been feeling kind of dead lately, I've been eating human flesh baby, I'm a zombie wah wah.'

Rosie is laughing and looking in his eyes when laughing makes her realise how badly she wants to pee so she pushes her chair back.

'Going for a pizzle.' What? Pizzle? That's not even a word.

Megs goes with her, and Feebs and Abby join them. The toilets are quite nice, with boxes of tissues, but some scuzzy girls have left the floor in the stalls wet.

'How come it's wet in here?' she asks.

'Did someone pee on the floor? That would be totally inappropriate,' says Feebs.

Rosie treads carefully to avoid getting anything on her ballet slippers because the pink sequins would be impossible to clean, or on the hem of her skirt, which isn't actually a hem but kind of pointed ruffles.

While she's peeing, Feebs asks, 'Guess what my word is for this week!'

Rosie can't guess and Feebs says she's not going to tell her. They are peering in the mirror for eye gunk and Abby is going on about how Den expects her to go all the way because it's prom night but she's not ready when Rosie checks Megs.

Megs is actually crying, silently, with tears rolling down her cheeks and a red nose and everything.

'Hey babes.' Rosie puts her arms round her. Everybody joins in a group hug and they're all, 'What's up?'

Meg blurts out that Kieron was on about how lame it is to go to the prom but then he didn't tell Megs he wasn't coming, and she's not sure whether they've broken up and he's probably gone to the Anti-Prom party that Bonita said she was going to have in her mother and stepfather's summerhouse. Feebs and Rosie drag Megs outside in the fresh air and round the edge of the tennis courts. Then Feebs goes back in the main room because Aaron's band has started playing, but Rosie goes in the Ladies again to help Megs sort out her face.

‘Well thank Santa and all his angels that people didn’t come as couples,’ says Megs. ‘Got any wipes?’

Rosie runs some loo roll under the cold tap.

Megs scrubs at the mascara detritus. Rosie passes her powder compact. Megs has brought her own lipgloss. They join the hordes on the dance floor and do mad seventies arms-up-and-down-like-you’re-climbing-a-ladder routines and laugh a lot. Rosie keeps catching Aaron’s eye and he smiles at her but when his band has finished and the disco’s pounding out she can’t see him anywhere. She wanders in the direction of the car park to have a look. Tom is lurking behind the door, smoking a fag.

‘Where’s Aaron?’

‘They’re taking their stuff to unload before the party so they can give more people a lift.’

‘Isn’t that what roadies are for? You think he likes me?’

‘He did say he can’t stand girls who all go to the bog together to giggle and gossip. He reckons it’s as bad as whispering and passing notes in class.’

‘Oh my god, that is so not fair. I was helping Megs through a crisis because Kieron didn’t even turn up this evening, without warning.’

Plus she might actually have to revise her opinion of Aaron, because laughing and chatting with her mates and joking and passing notes in class are totally some of the things that make life worth living. If he wants a girl who’s all isolated and serious, it so isn’t going to be Rosie.

‘Whatever.’ She stalks back inside.

A slow number comes on. Typical.

Patrick appears out of nowhere. This is wrong. It was supposed to be Aaron and the crowd parting and all that.

‘Hi Rosie.’

Oh what the fuck. He doesn’t have to say anything. She knows he wants to dance. The good thing is she doesn’t feel all nervous and flustered and worried about what to say or what to do with her hands. She reaches out and takes his hand and he sort of cuddles his arms round her and they are dancing. It’s easy. He’s taller than she is and she rests her head against his shoulder. He smells of some kind of fabric conditioner and lemony aftershave, although she doesn’t know if he shaves, and a kind of warm skin smell that is nice. It feels

comfortable in the dimmed lights, except what about Megs? Supposing Megs is the only person not dancing in a couple. But she's sitting at the table, talking to Tom.

Patrick's eyes are as dark as Rosie's and he's mixed race like she is, and he's looking into her eyes, and he moves towards her slightly and she lifts her mouth and his eyes go out of focus and his lips touch hers and it makes her feel gooey and achy in a nice way.

When the song ends, Feebs grabs her elbow and tugs her to the Ladies.

'I saw you kiss Patrick.'

'He's like my brother or something,' Rosie says.

'In that case, it's absolutely inappropriate.'

Seven.

I go to Greece with my mother and Mel. We meet Amma on Friday and me and Amma make pudding pie on the beach. We play Ariel and Amma is Ariel and I am Ariel's sister because my hair is not long. I feel happy when I eat a big ice cream with white cream and strawberry sauce. When I'm not allowed to eat an ice cream it's not fair. I want to hit my mother but I'm not allowed so I lie down and kick the sand.

One night we go to a party and I make Mummy and Mel stay until midnight so me and Amma can dance with the Greek dancers and play on the beach. We aren't afraid of the dark. There are no witches. But the brambles crawl out of the dark and scratch my chest.

We get back to England and I feel too tired to walk. My chest hurts with the brambles and my head hurts and I feel shivery as though it is snowing. I have to go to X-ray and stay in hospital. I feel scared and I hate having needles. Tom comes to visit me and we ride the hospital bikes. We make dough birds with the lady. Tom makes Superbird. We make feathers for our birds and I make teeth. My teeth will bite the brambles. Tom stops my blood when we laugh.

When I get better I put a needle in Lucy's hand. She is my doll and she cries. I am good at doing bandages and I will be a doctor when I grow up. We go to see a film with Vonnegut and Malika called *Beethoven's 2nd* where the big dog has puppies. It is funny but it makes me want Daisy.

I feel very angry when I'm not allowed to eat cake. At home I draw a picture of myself making an angry face with all my teeth sharp, to bite. I show my mother. 'That's me when I'm angry. That's what I look like, so you'll know.'

I get my mother's pen and ask, 'How do you write, Rosie is angry?'

'Write Rosie, leave a space, tell me when you're done...then little i, s, then another space...a, n, g—the curly-tail g—then r, then y: curly-tail y.'

Mel catches up with Jay and Rosa at breakfast, on the terrace of the new building, up the hill from the old hotel. Rosa has a face like a diver ascending from low viz only to discover she's got the bends; for someone so easy-going she excels at imposing her mood. He wanders through to order a cafe con leche and then goes back outside and makes a roll-up while he waits for someone to bring it.

Jay scrapes a last spoonful from her bowl of yoghurt.

'I tried to choose the perfect place but now it seems like it's not right for anyone.' She sounds apologetic rather than disgruntled.

'What's up?' he asks.

'It's not that, Mum. It's just I miss my friends, specially in the evenings when I see young people. They're never on their own, they're always together.'

'I thought this was what you wanted,' he says. 'Hotel rather than a villa, walking distance from the beach?'

His coffee arrives.

Jay says, 'Yeah, but I should have found somewhere with some teenagers who speak English. And a naturist beach for you.'

'How about you, love?'

'Some town that doesn't have streets named after General Franco.'

Rosa wipes tears with her fingers.

'Come on, babes. Back in a minute.'

Jay tucks her arm through Rosa's and leads her away down the path.

He leaves them to sort it out. He needs to fetch his breakfast. Enjoy another coffee and his cigarette. It's a gorgeous morning. Their table is shaded by some kind of vine but even out of direct sunlight Mel feels warm. Downhill past the old hotel he can see a blue line above the white beach. Pale in the morning, sea and sky will darken as the day goes on. A woman with black hair and a thin face takes her seat at the next table. A woman alone is always more intriguing than those in couples or families. She must be Spanish: she's wearing

a short-sleeved shirt and jeans that look sophisticated compared with the kind of holiday clothes worn by English tourists. Her slender upper arms are rippled with white stretch marks.

A waiter arrives to clear but Mel indicates they haven't finished.

Her mother links elbows and pulls Rosie away from people eating breakfast, which is a relief because she can't face anybody. She grabs her sunglasses so nobody can see her eyes. She's crying and she doesn't know why because she's been through the hell of a bone marrow transplant and six months at home, and she knows it's beautiful here but she misses her mates. She clutches her mother's arm because she's crying so much she can hardly see. They end up at the pool but a guy is trawling a net over the surface so her mother guides her past the kiosk to the beach path and along the wooden walkway. Nobody on the beach because it's early, except another guy dragging loungers into rows but he's quite far away.

'Tell me what's up.'

'Nothing. Really.'

'You've got to tell me or I'll get on the phone to Megan or someone and beg them to ask you. The phone call will cost hundreds of pounds, so you'll have to get your university fund out of the building society to pay off our debts.'

She leans against her mother. The sea has little sparkling waves.

'It's beautiful here but I couldn't spend much time with people for six months and now I miss them. I feel like I should be grateful to be on holiday but...'

She can't say it's boring to be with her mother and Mel. They love her so much but she feels lonely and left out. When lads rev their mopeds loud as they drive past in the evenings it makes her think about their last holiday in Spain with Feebs when they used to chat to boys on the way back to the apartment. They had a laugh. They sunbathed on the roof together and got ready to go out together. Or when they went to Fuerteventura, when Bonita came and they hung out with the Spanish teenagers in the village. Rosie actually kissed that guy Tomás who was like eighteen, and it was better for their Spanish than a whole term at school. When she's with her mates, she can be sure that she's still the same person, not turning into somebody who is weird or isolated or dead serious.

'Have a good cry,' says her mother.

They just sit there for a while. Neither of them has a hankie but her mother brought a paper napkin, which is a bit scratchy but Rosie blows her nose on it.

‘Tell you what, I’ll ask the hotel to ring the travel agent and find out when there’s a flight. Mel can drive us to the airport even if he doesn’t want to go home and we can be back in Ipswich tomorrow. Or the day after.’

‘Mum. Are you sure?’

‘Definitely. This is supposed to be a pleasure after your ordeal. Not an endurance test.’

‘Thanks, Mum.’

She snuggles her head against her mother’s neck and then kisses her cheek. She’ll get back in time to celebrate the end of exams and see Aaron play at the Steamboat. It’s really important because she never got with him on prom night but she knows him a bit better now. She can text everybody and see what they’re up to.

Back at the terrace, her mother sits down and takes a swig of tea.

‘That is so yuck.’ She heads to the buffet for a fresh cup.

‘You all right, darlin?’ asks Mel.

‘Mum says—I’ll let her tell you.’

‘Tell me what?’ he asks as her mother comes back.

Her mother tells him.

‘Would you really do that and not think I’m a spoiled brat?’

Her mother gives Mel a get-with-the-programme look. She kisses Rosie.

Mel says, ‘I don’t mind driving you to the airport. Although I have to say, if that plane leaves the ground and you’re on it, you’ll regret it. Maybe not today, and maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life.’

‘Ignore him. Want me to sort it out this morning, sweetie?’

‘Oh, erm...Now you’ve said I can go, I’m not sure if I want to. Don’t be mad at me.’

Mum drinks her tea, Mel lights a cigarette and Rosie wishes he’d give up. She fiddles with her locket.

‘You can decide any time,’ her mother says. ‘You just have to promise to let us know.’

Jay collects the room key and says, ‘I’m going to put my sun cream on.’

Rosie picks up her own key. 'Will you do my back?'

Whitewashed, with dark beams, the old hotel resembles Elizabethan buildings in Ipswich. It's two star, cheaper than the new four-star hotel but better, Mel calls it the Bullfighters' Hotel because framed photos of matadors, pairs of horns and metal plaques embossed with bulls in fighting stances adorn the lobby and dining room. Jay translated blurbs about how Don Antonio used to be a famous matador, Mel said he reckons bullfighters are wankers who indulge in macho posturing.

In Rosie's bedroom, Jay rubs in factor twenty-five because the radiation treatments mean she could burn more easily.

'I'm going to swim in the sea.'

'D'you want me to save you a sunbed?' Rosie asks.

'Cool. Meds?'

'I've had them all.'

Next door Mel is smoothing the bottom sheet on the double bed.

'Rosie's gone down by the pool. I'll do your back.'

He strips off and she sprays non-greasy watermelon. Last night his skin looked bright pink but he tans easily, especially for someone with red hair, this morning it's turned beige.

'How can your hands be cold in this heat?' He adds, 'Good strategy. I don't want you to leave.'

'I meant it. Can you do mine?'

'The problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world,' he says. 'I like the way you don't have a droopy back, like elephants' legs or basset hounds' necks.'

She presses him into a clinch, her Nivea slithers against his Body Shop watermelon. He's her ideal man, nobody's perfect. After Rosie was discharged from Intensive Care fourteen years ago, when Jay would have been too paralysed by fear to travel anywhere, Mel whisked them away to Spain for a holiday in the sun, he taught Rosie to swim. It would be unrealistic to expect a man never to fall in love with anybody else for the rest of their lives. Sometimes you have to put the people you love in front of what you want yourself.

In the dunes at the side of the walkway grow lilies like pale daffodils, miraculous in the sand. Everything is a miracle. Rosie's better, Jay's's on

holiday with her family who love her, she'll make the most of the day because Rosie may want to go home tomorrow. She spreads her towel on the sand, takes off her dress and walks along the edge of the waves to get hot. What she told Rosie is true: if she lived on a beach she'd always feel contented.

Although it's only eleven she can feel the sun burning her left shoulder, she wades into the water and swims towards the horizon. In the sea she doesn't have to stay solid, she can dissolve and become part of the planet's breathing body. Life began in the sea. She swims far out of her depth and leans back against the ocean, no breakers out here but the sea rises and falls in a pattern she can't discern like her own breathing. Soon she'll go back and join them at the pool, they'll eat an early lunch at the café, the waiters will act snotty because they only order salad and bread. After lunch Jay and Mel will go to bed for a siesta, Rosie will chill under an umbrella and they'll all come back to the beach to jump waves, Mel will wear Jay's knickers because they're smaller than his trunks, to maximise his tan. They'll catch waves and zoom in on their bodyboards, shower and saunter along the shore to the town for an evening meal. And when they get back to England she may have an interview for a job as a photographer or a job in a photo archive.

As the sun sinks lower they walk on the hard sand, carrying their sandals. Rosie's wearing her dip-dyed top and prom skirt, the one with the jagged layers. The beach is practically empty next to the hotel but it gets crowded near the town. There are loads of old people stooping over holding buckets and Mel says they're digging for clams, erghh. The setting sun gives weirdly long shadows to families who play ping-pong or walk their dogs. A guy in a go-cart pulled by a kite has to steer round little kids and their sandcastles while a bonkers silhouette shadow speeds alongside him.

'I like the cage restaurant,' says her mother.

'The pizza was thin and crispy,' says Rosie. Plus it's near the market, which sells jewellery and sarongs and stuff, so they can go shopping after supper.

They've already taken down the cage. Maybe it's to stop people stealing the tables and chairs. A girl who looks about eight years old places knives, forks,

paper napkins and a handle-thingy that has oil, vinegar and toothpicks as well as salt and pepper in front of them with a serious face. She makes Rosie feel old.

‘That tree is packed with singing birds. They’re only tiny. They must have amplifiers in their throats.’

‘Yeah Mum.’

Her mother is so sweet. It’s great to see her all happy and enthusiastic instead of making an effort to be cheerful.

‘I love that tree. We should go and sit under it.’

‘Except if you sit under it they poo on your head.’

‘Have you decided if you want to go home?’

The woman brings their drinks.

‘It’s like, now you’ve said you’ll take me home, I don’t feel trapped. And I’ve only got this one chance to lounge by the pool in the sunshine, in a really nice hotel, and swim in the sea. And it’s only two weeks, and I’ll have the whole summer to see my friends. Even if some of them are going away, or have holiday jobs. And I’ve got the rest of my life.’ Plus her mother totally puts her first, and Mel loves her to bits, and she doesn’t want to spoil their fun.

Her mother says, ‘Love you, babes,’ and her dad says, ‘Love you, darlin,’ and they both look really happy.

Mel lights a cigarette and says, ‘I feel as if I’m still floating up and down on the waves. It’s such a fabulous feeling, like the water’s holding me and rocking me.’

Two lads park themselves at the next table. They order a beer, talk loudly and shoot glances at Rosa.

‘Bet they wouldn’t have picked this restaurant if you weren’t here.’ Jay leans forward so she can murmur discreetly.

‘Mum.’

When she’s paid the bill and they’re leaving, Jay says, ‘I bet you an ice cream they won’t stay now you’ve left.’

Rosa says, ‘Ice cream from the apple ice cream place?’

‘I can’t afford ice cream as well as a meal.’

Rosa nods towards the boys. ‘*They’d* buy me a beer.’

‘You don’t let men buy you drinks, do you?’ Jay sounds sincerely anxious.

‘Mum. I’m only joking around. Except I might go and live with the one with the eyebrows.’

‘OK, but I’m warning you, he’ll make you do all sorts in return for the beer and ice creams. He’ll make you scrub his sweaty socks and underpants. I might make you wash your own socks but I don’t get you to wash mine.’

‘I’ll buy you an ice cream at the apple-ice-cream place, and Jay can have an amaretto, and you won’t have to do anything in return,’ Mel says.

He doesn’t know how he feels about enormous teenagers fancying Rosa. Jay says only a very confident boy would get involved with a girl who’s had leukaemia, but Mel knows any boy will approach any girl if he has a chance to get his end away. As a teenager himself, he felt painfully self-conscious: a cliché that hardly comprehends the agony of remembered taunts or his desperation after that time at Terry’s. Dying his hair black from fifteen to eighteen even though it didn’t match his eyelashes.

Rosa adored Mel when she was younger. When she was twelve she asked Jay not to come to her birthday disco but she wanted Mel because he didn’t embarrass her. Since his affair with Cara, she’s changed. As though she didn’t realise it had to be Jay’s fault as much as his. He feels rejected now that Rosa and Jay have become so close; he felt left out when Jay shared Rosa’s room on the first night in the hotel, as well as when they went to the ball last year, which has to be different from him going to Nevis or Thailand with Siouxsie because Jay and Rosa couldn’t afford to go.

After their ice creams and coñacs, they walk home in the dark. They follow the road rather than the beach. Mel takes advantage of a passing moped to fart but the fart reverberates after the rattle of the moped dies away.

‘Mel!’

Rosa lets go of his arm, but she laughs. Jay joins in with a fart that spurts in time with her steps.

‘God, honestly. You’re supposed to be adults.’

They kiss Rosa goodnight on the balcony. In the room, he says to Jay, ‘I love you, you know. When we weren’t together, I couldn’t do without you. I’m not going anywhere.’

He rolls a joint and takes his book onto the balcony while Jay reads in bed. Renko has ended up in the exclusion zone around the Chernobyl reactor.

The ecologist tells the detective that plutonium takes twenty-five thousand years to decay and that radionuclides affect growing organisms more than adults. Mel folds a corner of the page and shuts the book. He reaches behind to switch off the light. That hideous time is over. Rosa is recovering. In the darkness he can make out the turquoise pool lit from underwater, dark palms against the lighter beach and even the faint pale stripes of white horses galloping in against the black mass that is sea and sky. Blurred without his distance glasses. Out in the night there must be stars but he can't see them.

Eight

My mother meets me from school and she meets Tom. I am glad that she is not at work like Tom's mother. She lets us walk along the wall and then we make big bubbles with washing-up liquid and glistening in a bucket and we take turns to hold the handle with the lacy string.

We go for a walk to the cemetery. It isn't so far to walk as the park but my mother asked Tom's mother in case she doesn't like the dead people. People are frightened of dying but everybody in the world will die, only not until they are old. My mother isn't going to die until she is older than Granjee and nor will I. I don't need to be frightened because I went down close to death when I was two years old, so I know all about it even though I've forgotten. When people nearly die and then come back they see a bright light and feel more happier than they ever felt, which is nothing to be afraid of.

In the cemetery we don't walk on people's graves because even though they don't care their families might not like it and if we run on somebody's grave we say sorry in case they are watching. Mostly we go to the Field of Honour because there aren't any dead people there, just headstones lined up like Assembly that say the names of people who died in the war. The teacher calls the register and each dead person says, Here. We climb the steps of the cross and jump off, and we do somersaults in the grass. Mummy can only do backwards but me and Tom can do backwards and forwards. We eat cakes I helped to make that have jam hiding in the middle but they aren't proper cakes and there's no sugar. It's not fair.

When we get home Ken and the bad Barbies catch the good Barbies and take their clothes off and tie them to the stake. They are in danger. There are brambles all around.

'He digs it right in so they can't get free,' says Ken.

'Master, Master,' says the bad Barbie. She sounds like a witch.

‘Help, help!’ scream the good Barbies. They are stupid. That is a bad word.

I make the sea come up the mountain. Two dolphins called Flipper and Splash swim up the sea and rescue the good Barbies. They undo the ropes and make a ski lift so the Barbies can escape to their castle. I’ve never been on a ski lift.

‘Like at Pleasurewood Hills when you go flying over,’ says Tom. ‘Can I use two ribbons?’

‘My ribbons are thinner than yours, that’s why I’ve got two.’

The Barbies escape on a coat hanger and the dolphins swim away.

I have to give Janice and Tillie more cardboard. They are the names of my next favourite nurses. Tom lets Tillie scrabble up his sleeve but then she might nibble her way through his jumper. Mummy let me bring the gerbils home from school because they were both girls but they had sixteen babies anyway so the vet found homes for them, all except for Tillie and Janice. Mummy says Tillie and Janice really are girls because she’s got good at telling the difference. Janice is blond and Tillie has dark hair. I still miss Daisy.

There are all sorts of families. Some children live with just their mother like me and Tom and some live with their sister like Tillie and Janice. When I grow up I will always meet my children from school but if they cry I will always give them sweets.

The driver drops them at the back of the new building, which is so new that the ground floor is still wrapped in plastic. Mel goes for breakfast while Rosie and her mother get Rosie's blood tested, wait for the results and take a lift to the fifteenth floor. They play noughts and crosses and then hangman in a corridor that smells like paint. Her mother gets the whole body swinging from the gallows-thingy, but not the face, with ENERGETIC, and then Rosie achieves a body that has one hand on its right arm and a crossbar on the gallows with SUPERSTICIOUS.

‘That should be a t not a c,’ her mother points out.

‘Draw some faces and see if I can work out what the expressions mean. Like this.’

Rosie draws five circles on the back of the sheet for her blood levels and adds cartoon eyebrows, eyes, nose and mouth, like a smiley only more varied. Her mother gets three right but the one she labels evil Rosie says is happy to be telling you off and the one Mum guesses is silly, with eyebrows shaped like roofs, dot eyes and its tongue lolling out, is supposed to be hungry. Her mother draws expressions which Rosie identifies as shocked, happy, tired, angry and not again.

‘Yeah, that’s right,’ Mum says. ‘Although I thought of it as resigned.’

Then Rosie beats her at hangman with DOLPHIN, Mel comes along the corridor chewing his last mouthful of ciabatta and they get called in to see the doctor.

It’s one of the random doctors, somebody Rosie’s met before but no-one special. She sort of looks past Rosie’s left eye and says, ‘Did Dr Crispin tell you about the results of your last bone marrow test? At the moment, there about thirty per cent blasts apparent. I’m afraid that means the leukaemia is coming back. We’ve given you our strongest treatment, but it hasn’t worked.’

I am tumbling falling away down I don’t understand what she’s saying Mum takes hold of my hand.

It can't be real because last Monday Mum made pizza and then I went to the ice-cream parlour with Siouxsie and we watched Madagascar at the UGC and on Tuesday I went to Ali's party and it felt normal: how life should be. True Dr Baldwin said it looked as if there are some leukaemia cells but I didn't think it was THE END.

THE END

The doctor says, 'There are two options,' which means I've got basically two choices, but I can't take it in. The adults are talking but I can't hear because

What is the fucking point?

What was the fucking point of making such a huge effort to be brave think positive get better been too strong for too long I can't why me? I'm falling I can't get up fear in my tummy winter again trapped underground want to run away

The doctor fixes me with a serious stare. At least she's actually looking me in the eyes. 'Rosie, have you got any questions?'

'How long will I live if I don't have any more chemo?'

The doctor presses her fingertips together, elbows on the desk, hands in front of her face, a barrier against Rosie who has failed. Who is dying. At least her mum's still holding her hand as though Rosie's the best thing that ever happened to her and she doesn't want to let go.

'It's impossible to say... Maybe a few weeks, or months.'

'I feel very shocked and upset,' says Mum. 'Is there somewhere we can be on our own for a few minutes?'

'You're welcome to stay in here.' The doctor picks up Rosie's massive file and goes out.

'Please will you sit on my knee?' asks Mum, so Rosie does.

Mel stands with his arms round them.

'Are you crying?' Mum asks.

'I am,' says Mel.

'No. I don't want to cry till I get home. I don't want to smudge my eye makeup,' Rosie says.

They all laugh, even though it isn't funny.

‘What do you want to do?’ Mum asks.

‘Go to Disneyland Florida?’ asks Mel.

‘Go shopping in Paris,’ Rosie says. ‘Can I spend my university money?’

They laugh again.

The nurse specialist comes in and sits in the doctor’s chair.

‘Rosie’s decided to start smoking, eat nothing but chocolate and buy her autumn clothes at Gucci,’ says her mum.

‘Why not?’

The nurse leans forward and talks to Rosie while maintaining an extremely sorrowful pout which is actually really annoying, not only because Rosie’s going to die sooner than she hoped but also because she wants to tell the woman to wipe that stupid expression off her face. Rosie says she’d like a reiki treatment if the therapist is around and she wants to talk to Martha in Ipswich rather than anybody here.

Thank God the reiki master is really normal and cheerful. She dangles the crystal over Rosie and says all her chakras are open and she’s still surrounded by pink light, which is love, which makes Rosie think, Why am I dying in that case? But she doesn’t say it. While the woman lays her hands on Rosie’s feet and arms and head and everything it does make her feel a bit more real and alive. But not like when she was in for her transplant and had reiki, when she could feel light whooshing up and down her body.

‘Don’t give up,’ the reiki master says. ‘There are lots of choices and treatments for you.’

When Martha comes round next day she behaves all normal, as though nothing’s changed.

‘Cup of tea?’ Mum asks and when Martha says, ‘Yes please,’ she starts to get up but Rosie goes, ‘I’ll make it,’ and puts the kettle on.

‘Any questions?’ Martha asks.

Rosie chooses a mug for her: one of the thin china mugs her mum likes, the summer mug with flowers.

‘They said I can decide between supportive treatment and some kind of chemo. But then it was like they wanted to hurry us away and get rid of us and I couldn’t really understand what she was on about.’

‘Supportive treatment means red cells if you need them, if you’re running low on oxygen. Platelets if you get bruising or nosebleeds. Fighting infections while you’re still strong and enjoying life. Pain relief. Steroids can be helpful to keep you strong.’

Rosie hates steroids because the chipmunk look has never appealed to her. Her mum catches her eye as Rosie pours boiling water, like she knows what Rosie’s thinking.

‘Don’t give up on the idea of chemo, though. Some kinds are less toxic so you won’t lose your hair,’ says Martha.

While Rosie mashes the teabag against the side of the mug, hoicks it out with the teaspoon and adds sugar and milk, another part of her is hurling the mug at the window and shouting. Except that wouldn’t do anybody any good, so she gives Martha her tea and sits at the table. She has so many questions but she doesn’t want to upset her mum.

Her mum says, ‘Is it all right if I ask Martha what it’s like to die of leukaemia?’

‘That’s exactly what I wanted to ask.’

Her mum gets up and stands rubbing Rosie’s back and Rosie knows she’s crying.

‘I’ve never seen anyone die from leukaemia in distress,’ Martha says. ‘In my experience, it’s always been a peaceful death. You tend to get weaker and slip away. If you need platelets at the end, we give them, because it’s not very nice, bleeding.’

Martha stays quiet for a couple of minutes. Rosie can hear a bird singing in the garden, not just that cheeping they do but a song that has a tune.

‘I care about the whole person,’ says Martha. ‘Not only the physical side. As well as being a specialist nurse, I’m an ordained vicar.’

Mum says, ‘I’ve been talking to Rosie about how it’s important to get in touch with a part of you that that doesn’t die. Because it can help with the fear.’

‘Of course,’ says Martha, ‘and that part is...’

‘The soul,’ Rosie says. ‘Whatever religion you belong to, they all believe you have a soul...some part of you that carries on after you die, whether it’s going to heaven, or reincarnation, or whatever. We did it at school.’

Martha drinks her tea and Mum sits down.

‘Would you like a biscuit?’ she asks.

Martha says, ‘One way to think of it is that all the cells in your body have renewed themselves in the last seven years. Not one single cell is the same. So you’re completely changed, yet you carry on being you. So what’s the part of you that stays the same, if it’s not at the physical level? I like to think of it as the glue that holds it all together.’

That doesn’t seem very spiritual: Rosie’s soul is glue. But on the other hand, it’s comforting to think that even if all her cells change, maybe even if they come from another person, it won’t change who she is.

After Martha leaves, Rosie wants to stop thinking so she gets a Twix bar out of the food cupboard and takes a bite and lets the chocolate and caramel melt between her tongue and the roof of her mouth until she feels distracted by its creamy sweetness. Chocolate has serotonin or something that makes you happy. When she gets down to the biscuit, she chews, and after she’s eaten two bites she chews the rest of the bar and then she wants another. She eats the entire packet of bars and then she feels sick and her stomach hurts and it doesn’t make her feel happy. Just fat and she hates herself.

She goes and looks through her witchcraft book to see if it says anything about the soul or what happens when you die. Her bookmark is a piece of card that says Groovy Chick on one side in gel-pen bubble writing with pink and yellow hearts and Disco Diva on the other in green and blue with spots. She must have done it in Year Five or Six. It makes her feel sad for the little podgy girl she was then, when she gave herself injections and her best friend was Tom. She keeps all her Wicca tools and books in a special wooden box that Mel got her that used to seem like a treasure chest. She made her own wand out of willow. She asked the tree first. Witchcraft is about being in touch with earth and fire and water and air, and about getting what you want without hurting anyone else. How come Rosie never gets what she wants?

She feels like a bag of stones. There’s a stone in her throat and a stone in her chest where her heart should be. She shoves everything back in the box and shoves the box back in the cupboard but while the cupboard’s open she sees all the black models from Aspire and Glamour and Pride and Essence stuck to the inside of the door. What is the fucking point? Why is her life crap and she’s always been ill and she’s always been podgy and she’s always been the only

black girl in the class, as though they add one to each class. All these beautiful women are smiling or pouting and looking sexy and Rosie thought slavery days were over and it's time to move on up but she might as well be a fucking slave as tortured with poisons and chemicals and radiation and she grabs her athame out of the box even though she's not supposed to cut anything in the material world and slashes through their faces: Halle Berry and Oluchi Onweagba and Naomi Campbell and Tyra Banks and Jaunel McKenzie and Iman and Grace Jones and people whose names she doesn't know. She hates them all but really she hates herself and she doesn't even deserve to live and she wants to cut herself but she promised her mum she wouldn't hurt herself but she hates her mum as well because she's fucking useless too.

Mel catches up with them in the fifteenth-floor corridor. This hospital is brand spanking new compared with the decades of cream paint and varnish on dark wood in PPW3. He wonders how long before the shine will wear off.

'Look, my neutrophils have gone back up,' says Rosa.

'No, sorry babes. It's not sixteen, it's sixteen per cent of your white blood count.' Jay makes a face.

'Crap. My haemoglobin's really low too; they're going to say I need red cells.'

He sits down to play hangman but before they get started the doctor calls them in. Three chairs in a row face a fabulous view with the London Eye in the distance. He hasn't got his glasses on or he might be able to see the big wheel turning. Rosa sits in the middle.

The doctor has deep-set eyes, hair in a greying bob and a grey suit. She glances at the monitor on the desk. 'Did Dr Crispin speak to you about the results of your last bone marrow test?'

Rosa looks at Jay.

Jay says, 'Dr Baldwin said there were some leukaemia cells, but we're not sure what that means.'

'They couriered a sample to us, which shows thirty per cent blasts. I'm afraid that means the leukaemia is coming back. We've given you our strongest treatment, but it hasn't worked.'

‘What do you mean, hasn’t worked?’ he asks. ‘What will you do next? Another transplant?’

‘I’m afraid we have no other treatments to offer.’

‘What went wrong? Was her treatment not properly directed? Is it something to do with her first consultant going to the States and the next one taking maternity leave?’

The doctor faces him without meeting his eyes. ‘I don’t know what went wrong. We didn’t make any mistakes. If we did it again, we’d give exactly the same treatments.’

Jay reaches across Rosa to squeeze his hand. ‘We knew at the start it might not work.’

Sweat breaks out, at his hairline first and then all over his forehead and in his armpits. Maybe the donor wasn’t a good enough match. They should have waited to find a better match. Or maybe whoever it was didn’t give enough cells; Jay said the transplant was smaller than a bag of blood. Maybe she ought to have told London about Rosa’s GVHD earlier, or UCLH should have kept seeing her weekly. He wants an enquiry into what went wrong. They can’t designate some random doctor to say, The treatment hasn’t worked, you’re going to die in a couple of months. Somebody must be accountable.

The doctor has gone, Rosa is sitting on Jay’s knee and he’s standing with his arms round both of them, weeping. It is so wrong. He knows his parents are going to die sometime even though he loves them; it’s the natural order of things. But Rosa is sixteen. It’s impossible. Like snow in August or the sun setting at the back of the house instead of the front. There must be something they can do.

He doesn’t know what to do next. Jay always knows what to do. She arranges for Rosa to have reiki, which is some kind of massage or spiritual healing. They don’t want to talk about her prognosis in front of a stranger, with the result that they’re all really quiet on the journey home. Even the driver gives up trying to chat after a while.

Mel goes into work because he has to finish up before Edinburgh. If he doesn’t get the programme finalised and the publicity out, the Film House will definitely shut down and then he’ll be out of a job as well as Rosa being...he can’t think

about it now. The routine of parking the Citroën, keying in the door code and booting up his PC helps take his mind off it.

He adds a Philip French quote to the blurb for Silver City. Mel caught it at Cambridge. John Sayles writes and directs movies that are consistently cogent, witty and fun, with great women characters. If Mel were to consider only his own preferences, he'd run a Sayles season, but it wouldn't be the best choice for Ipswich. He could get away with it in Brighton, or Newcastle. He can't foresee Bombón: El Perro as a runaway hit, either, but part of his remit must be to ensure the local populace has the opportunity to watch quality cinema even if they neglect to take advantage of it. He inserts a quote from Peter Bradshaw into his copy for the Argentinian movie but it's too long. He deletes the first half of the sentence, then changes his mind, presses the Undo arrow and deletes the last part instead. A critic grinning all over his face says it all. The most popular films with IFH audiences tend to be Merchant-Ivory productions, or the sort of movie Stephen Frears is directing at the moment, about the Windmill Theatre: homage to British history, stars like Judi Dench and Bob Hoskins, a spot of nudity and Frears' credibility as a director. *Melinda and Melinda*, maybe. Auteur films.

He wants to go round to Jay's but they need to have their own lives, not function as a dreary unit in a routine of meals, work, TV and sleep. This crisis is so huge it threatens to swallow everything else, so that all at once he can understand the shape of *Terms of Endearment*, that always before seemed top heavy with emotion, weirdly structured with the first half comedy and the second tragedy. He wants to be in *Singin' in the Rain* not bloody *Terms of Endearment*. He wants to sunbathe at the site but the sky has clouded over. He wants to go home and watch something escapist and funny, drink a glass of red wine and smoke a spliff. Only half five. He'll finish a first draft of the entire brochure and then head home. No, he'll give it one more hour. He'll go outside for a cigarette and force himself to do an hour from when he comes back in. At least working distracts him for ten minutes at a time.

He takes the Edinburgh brochure home with him. He can't be bothered to cook. Cup of tea. Order a pizza or slap together a sandwich? The bread's a bit old. Shower first; he's hot and sticky after London and the office. Everywhere he looks compels him to think about Rosa. Her hair in the plughole, which would normally enrage him, makes him feel sad, if feeling sad manifests as a pain

under his sternum. Her Pink CD in the player in the kitchen. The mess she should have tidied which spills from her desk in the dining room: hair dryer, mascara, an eye-shadow palette leaking powder. Maths revision pages, a tangle of lace, books, socks. He sniffs the socks. Dirty socks, but he can't even manage to get mad about her leaving dirty socks on her desk.

He's missed The Archers. Stale bread, leftover chicken, salad stuff...he'll make a club sandwich. Toast the bread, hold the bacon, it won't need any cooking. Enough butter and mayo so it's not dry. Edinburgh. He was looking forward to Thumbsucker and a documentary about miners in South Wales. Serenity sold out before he had time to book but there's a chance he might bump into Joss Whedon at a party. He can't summon any enthusiasm. He wants to go and bury himself in Jay. As long as she doesn't use this as an excuse to withdraw.

The sandwich pokes at his stomach as though he neglected to chew. Get on with the next thing. Bring the washing in from yesterday. Jay said she was going to clear the cat shit from under the leylandii but he can still smell it.

He pours a glass of Rioja, rolls a joint and glances through the stack of videos in front of the telly. Rather than catch up on The Wire or 24, he slots last month's Grand Prix into the player. His joint crackles. He feels himself relax as he holds the hash smoke in for a couple of seconds. He sinks back against the cushions and lifts his feet onto the settee. The wine is delicious, rich and almost blackcurranty. Highlights, not the whole thing. Getting dark outside. Cannabis makes some people psychotic or paranoid but he's been smoking since he was seventeen without any deleterious effects. Jay used to smoke in the day and then do her sitting, or go to work, or start dancing. It hijacks your nervous system and distorts messages your brain sends to your limbs, which is why it must be more normal to slob out on the settee than get up and dance. Affects the control centre for hunger. Toker-smokers get fat. As well as the memory centre.

The race has started. Most sport is boring, but the whine of the Formula One cars doing laps has a hypnotic effect. Lulling, with a bit of a thrill. Ralf Schumacher squeezes Fernando Alonso into the first turn. Damages Alonso's front wing. But he keeps going. Then Klien touches wheels with Villeneuve on the same turn and spirals into a spectacular barrel roll, finishing unbelievably right way up and unharmed. Mel gulps more wine. Why do some people end up

unharmd while others simply end? Don't think about it now. Suck in more smoke. There goes the short-term memory. Zap the grey-haired doctor. Erase the day.

Nnnneeeooow. Zoop, zoop. More laps. Watch out. Alonso's front wing detaches itself. Flaps into the path of oncoming cars. Most of the drivers manage to swerve or avoid it somehow but Coulthard smashes into the debris. Both the Red Bull drivers are out of the running. The Scot's left-front suspension is fucked but nobody's dead. Kimi Räikkönen takes first place, with Michael Schumacher second and his brother Ralf less than an instant behind him.

'Did Dr Crispin speak to you about the results of your last bone marrow test? They couriered a sample to us, which shows thirty per cent blasts. I'm afraid that means the leukaemia is coming back. We've given you our strongest treatment, but it hasn't worked.'

Hold Rosie's hand. She is so well, in spite of her blood results. It can't be true. Her hair has grown back into short curls and she's chosen her A-levels.

'What can we do now? What do you suggest?'

'There is nothing else we can offer.'

Jay needs to do the washing up from this morning, water the garden and make tea. She's frightened to turn on the tap in case a pipe bursts, she feels terrified of so many things: the insane amount of traffic on the roads, nuclear radiation leaks, lies, the gunk in plugholes that might cause Rosie to get a fatal infection. Her rubber gloves are wet on the insides. It hasn't rained all week but she can hear the river running under the house. Breathe. She'll ring Elsa and make an appointment. Sweep the floor. Tears plop onto the cork tiles as she bends forward with the broom.

Rosie goes to bed early but when Jay's drifting off she speaks from the doorway: 'I can't sleep.'

'Get into bed?' Jay feels so exhausted she can hardly react. 'You can shove the blanket on me if it's too hot.'

Rosie edges under the duvet and snuggles back against Jay's belly until they're spooned. When she was younger she always wanted to sleep in Jay's bed

but she never does now. Jay breathes in the smell of her coconut hair lotion and her sweat that smells different from her own: less sour, more musky. She forces herself to wake up because she needs to help her daughter, Rosie's dealing with fear of death that winds itself round your heart and strangles you as kids used to say chewing gum would if you swallowed it, Jay could almost see it clouding Rosie's solar plexus earlier, dark purple terror with a pale custard nimbus, maybe that's why kids chant cowardy-cowardy custard, why men stricken with fear got called yellow. Sleep is the best healer.

‘D’you want some Natrasleep, sweetie?’

Rosie doesn't answer, her breathing is regular although a bit sniffly because of her cold. Jay can feel herself trying to breathe lightly so she won't disturb her, it's like being in love, as though she were lying awake in the dark listening to her lover breathe but instead of yearning to be loved back she feels a huge desire to protect her daughter that stretches her heart until her inside grows bigger than her outside. She has nothing to feel miserable about because Rosie is alive, and not in pain right now.

She wants to turn over to get comfortable, she doesn't want to disturb Rosie, she needs to sleep so she can drive Rosie safely to the hospital for her blood transfusion. It can't be true. Jay has to make sure that Rosie won't float away from her on an iceberg, that she won't get frozen and buried under ice, that she won't vanish into a freezing mist inhabited only by leopard seals and killer polar bears with blood-stained paws. She tries to cry without making any noise, her tongue feels too big, she can feel its tip wagging, which makes her think of Rosie saying how when she gets bored in lessons she traces stars or hearts on the roof of her mouth. Five-pointed stars are easy but six-pointed need two separate triangles. Rosie says Jay has a fat tongue. Rosie can curl her tongue so it's hollow with the sides folded upwards, she must have inherited the ability from Isaac because Jay can't curl her tongue. She needs to transform herself into a magic carpet of love for Rosie, not consider herself at all nor expect any reciprocity, that's what it means to be a mother, she won't let Rosie die.

A boy called Anthony Walker was murdered in a park where he ran with his girlfriend to get away from racists who were insulting them at a bus stop. Rosie says racists are so stupid they aren't worth bothering about. Unprovoked attack, it said in the papers, he loved basketball and wanted to be a lawyer, three

or four men attacked him in the park, they embedded an axe in his skull, that's what it said in the paper, embedded, which doesn't sound like murder. For no reason except racism. Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley and more, Stephen Lawrence, Zahid Mubarek, Anthony Walker. His parents are Christians so they believe in forgiveness. When Jay, Mel and Rosie were coming back from Spain everything was on high alert but they didn't know why until they saw headlines about the London bombings. Bless the people who were in the Tube and the people who died on the bus, may they be happy, may they be free from suffering. Jay took that bus while Rosie was in UCLH. May Rosie be well, may she be happy, may she be free from suffering.

They drag themselves through another week, Rosie says she doesn't want to talk, she avoids her friends, if Jay asks what's up she says, 'Nothing.'

Jay finds a black-and-white print in which Rosie's laughing, back lit, beautiful, Rosie left it on the kitchen table, she has a habit of leaving messages where Jay's bound to find them, for instance a diary open to a page that details why Rosie feels angry with her. She has pressed so hard on the back of the photo that the biro's almost torn the thick paper, that it's ruined the print:

Is this all there is?

What is the point?

Why me? Did I do something bad?

What happens after you die?

What will happen to me after I die?

Jay goes looking for her, Rosie asks for a massage. Afterwards, while she's lying face down on Jay's bed, Rosie says, 'Maybe now's a good time to talk.'

'You can say anything to me, babes.'

'I kind of want to let go of life.'

Don't take it personally, it must be really hard for her to say. This is about Rosie not about Jay.

'Because all I've ever wanted is to be normal and healthy, but I have to make such an effort. And every time I get better, the normal time seems shorter and the illness that comes after it seems worse.'

Jay rests her hands on Rosie's back, on top of the towel she's pulled over to keep her warm because it's cold for August.

'So I don't want to have to keep on making an effort, but I don't want to disappoint you and Mel, because you love me.'

Jay can tell she's crying, she lies next to her and cuddles her. The front door opens and Mel calls hello, Jay lifts her head so she won't shout in Rosie's ear.

'We're upstairs!'

Mel comes up.

'I left work early. Well, extremely early,' he says.

He lies down on the other side of Rosie so she forms the filling in a cuddle sandwich. Jay repeats what Rosie said, and adds, 'You need to do what's best for you, not worry about other people.'

'That's right, darlin,' he says.

They lie still for what seems like half an hour, Jay can feel her own heart beating, she can feel Rosie's heart beating, with her arm reaching over Rosie she can feel Mel's heart too, and she can smell Rosie's hair. It's enough, for now.

'I feel like when we were in Spain, except it's my entire life,' says Rosie. 'I ought to be out with my mates, but instead I'm stuck with my parents, but at least you love me.'

Mel says, 'It's supposed to rain this afternoon. I brought the car. If you could do anything in the world, what would you do?'

'Go bowling.'

They eat lunch and go bowling, the first time in their lives for both Mel and Jay, Mel gets the hang of it quite quickly but Jay's balls veer into the gutter, they have a laugh and then drive to Beatrice House. Mel works out in the gym while Rosie droops on a lounger and Jay swims lengths, rain mizzles outside, old women hobble along the edge of the pool. Rosie's withdrawn, Jay distances herself when she feels terrible, Rosie needs to laugh, her favourite thing in life is laughing. When she was about eight they rang the Science Line, you could ask them any question about science, it was probably after an appointment at Great Ormond Street followed by a visit to the Science Museum. They discussed what Rosie wanted to find out and developed a question together, which was actually a few different questions: What is laughter? Why do human beings laugh? How

does it happen and what is the purpose of it? No internet access in those days so they rang up, the scientist said, We're not quite sure, we'll try to find out and we'll send you an answer, but even when Rosie received her answer in the post it seemed as if nobody really knew.

Jay swims across to Rosie. 'Come in the water.'

'I don't want to swim.'

'We can set each other tasks.'

'At least I won't ever have to be an old lady who can't walk properly,'

Rosie whispers before she slides into the water. 'At least I don't have to worry about catching an infection if I get water up my nose.'

Jay sets Rosie the task of sitting on the bottom of the pool, Rosie sets Jay the task of dragging her one length, Jay sets Rosie the task of doing half a length of butterfly stroke. Butterfly stroke is crazily splashy, it makes Rosie splutter and laugh.

'This is mental. Do people actually swim like this?' she asks.

'How about this one? This is a new one called dolphin stroke!'

Jay makes a supreme effort to leap out of the water in a curve and then dive under, it's lucky they have the pool to themselves, she surfaces, spits and rubs water out of her eyes.

'Like the ones we saw when we went on that boat at Tarifa,' she says.

They both try to do it, they wet themselves laughing. Rosie invents one called the hippopotamus where you have to swim along underwater and then surface under somebody and tip them over, when Mel arrives in his swimming trunks they try to persuade him to join in but he says they're loonies.

Nine

My teacher tells me not to cough. She tells me I'm too slow. She writes on my stories in red pen. She looks at me with slit eyes and a smile like when the wicked witch tempts the children with gingerbread so she can push them in the oven and eat them up.

I have to go to hospital and get a needle in my hand. I stay there for two weeks. Elspeth paints my face with an island and palm trees.

When I go back to school, Nadine and the other girls say I can't play because I don't know the game. Tom says I can play but the boys play football and kick it too hard so it hurts. We eat our packed lunches and Nadine says, 'You're disgusting.' I get tummy ache and a headache and I need to stay at home. My mother puts her hand on my forehead and she puts the thermometer under my tongue. She asks what is the matter but I don't want to say. I will say, Eye of toad, tail of newt and Coco de Tanday, three times. My fingernails will grow long and red lightning will flash out and I will point at Mrs Sulter and the mean girls and they will burst and the brambles will get them. When I tell my mother, her mouth goes cross and I feel sorry, but then she gives me a hug and says they are bullies. She says that it's wrong and she will go to the school and talk to Mr Hancock but I beg her, 'Please don't.'

I just want to be allowed to tell her because it makes me feel better. She promises, and she says Nadine's mother has got a new husband and Nadine has two new sisters who are older and maybe they're mean to Nadine and that's why Nadine is being mean to me. She says, 'Mrs Sulter looks like an elephant's bottom,' to make me laugh. She tells me when Mrs Sulter is mean to think of the worst insults in my own mind.

She gives me her silver locket. When she opens it, laughter floats out in big bubbles like the ones we make in a bucket. My mother got it to keep her safe. One night she dreamed that an old, wrinkly mermaid was singing her a song and

the words went, Look in your heart. When she woke up, she found the locket. And now she's giving it to me, to keep me safe.

Later on she says I can have school dinners with Tom instead of packed lunches. She says she's talked to Vonnelle and some other people and Mrs Sulter always picks on the African-Caribbean and African-Caribbean-English kids, which means she's racist. Racism is really stupid because nobody is black or white, not like black words on a white page. People are all different colours and it's only because some people wanted to get rich and take all the other people's land and treasure and make them work for nothing that they called people black. My poster says, We are here because you were there. I go to Caribbean Saturday School and we do extra maths and drama and writing, and we learn about black heroes like Garrett Morgan, who was an inventor and Lena Horne, who was a dancer and singer. One boy says, 'Jesus was black.'

Mum says, 'Racism isn't allowed,' but I say, 'Please don't go to the school.'

Mrs Sulter says I'll never pass my exams if I am so slow and I look at her and imagine myself saying, You smell of dog poo and your hair looks like dog poo.

My mum says I can have injections so I won't have to miss school, because if you're ill in hospital your friends think you are being disloyal to the group. She shows me the needle and lifts her skirt and squeezes a lump of her leg and sticks the needle in. I don't want her to. I have to go to the hospital and Daisy shows me how to do the injection myself. I practise on an orange. I know it's for my own good because it helps my bone marrow produce cells I haven't got but it hurts when I put the needle in and when I push the liquid into my leg, and it still hurts after I take it out.

It's weird that her mum is driving when Mel's in the car, and it's weird to be going on the train with Mel rather than her mum. The train is due to leave in four minutes so she doesn't have time to worry about saying goodbye. She and Mel have to walk through both carriages to find somewhere to sit next to each other because you can't reserve seats on this train and it's really crowded because of the summer holidays. He wants to talk about her exam results but she doesn't want to discuss it in front of people.

She goes, 'Is it all right if I read my book?'

Her favourite book used to be *Noughts and Crosses* by Malorie Blackman, which is a love story like *Romeo and Juliet*, and also an adventure story, and is totally gripping, but the best thing is it invents a world where the noughts are all white people while the crosses are black. So it shows someone like Rosie what it would be like to be part of the privileged race, and it totally makes her friends understand for the first time what racism is. It's brilliant, but a bit thought-provoking. She doesn't want to read anything serious at the moment. She's been reading her old Jacqueline Wilsons only she needs something longer for a long journey so she packed *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, which is a children's book but adults enjoy it as well. Half-blood sounds like when people call her half-caste, which Mum and Daryl-from-Caribbean-School say is wrong because she's not half of anything.

Mel is reading the paper. Out of the window Rosie can see flat fields and cows. Inside, a woman is ignoring her baby while she texts or something on her phone. Rosie could text her mates except she still hasn't told them. She can feel the stones in her throat and stomach. She told the psychologist at the hospital she wants to give them the news herself, but she somehow can't find the right time. Anyway, Feebs and Barbie are away. When she was round at Megs' last weekend, Megs' mothers were going on about their new conservatory and why everything's gone wrong and Rosie wanted to shout at them: Get some perspective! You're adults and you've got each other and your kids are healthy,

so what does it matter about your stupid conservatory? Megs asked what was up but Rosie said, Maybe I'm pre-menstrual. She vows that she'll text everybody as soon as she gets back from Zelda's. No, on her way home from Zelda's, to arrange a meeting. She made Mum promise not to tell Zelda and Amma because she wants to do it herself.

She eats her lunch and then she needs a pee but the train has one of those toilets where the door is about two metres wide and slides open in a curve and she always feels terrified it's going to open while she's sort of half squatting with her knickers down. She can tell Mel, because he's really easy to talk to about anything like that. He believes that people shouldn't be ashamed of their bodies, and periods are totally normal, and you should talk about them in a normal voice. Rosie's really paranoid about germs. When you flush the loo molecules shoot out for a radius of about a metre so Rosie always shuts the lid; also they learned in science that when you smell something it's because molecules are going up your nose so if you can smell poo then tiny particles must be inside your nose, which is gross, especially if it's somebody else's poo. Except her mum says it's not paranoid because she could end up in hospital.

She nudges Mel and says in a quiet voice, 'I need a pee.'

He folds the paper and says, 'Do you want me to check the loo for you?'

'Please. And can you wait outside to make sure the door doesn't open?'

When they change trains at Peterborough she starts to feel really nervous because she hasn't been anywhere away from her mum and Mel since the spring, when she stayed with Siouxsie. Amma's been on holiday to France with her mates and no adults even though she's three months younger than Rosie.

Amma texts to say they're at the station but Rosie still has a wobbly moment between leaving Mel on the train and going through the barrier, where she sees them rushing to hug her. Then she gets swallowed up in hugs and Zelda goes, 'We love you so much, gorgeous beautiful girl. We're so happy you're here!'

Amma's different from Rosie and her mates: her hair is long and curly, she wears black eye makeup and a black lacy dress over ripped jeans and loads of bracelets with wooden beads. She's really voluptuous but she worries about being fat. She makes Rosie strap herself into the middle back seat so she can snuggle up, because she's a real cuddle-puppet.

She starts to tell Rosie all about how she and her friend Maeve put cushions up their dresses and walked around the village green so everybody would be shocked and gossip about them being preppers. Her voice gets really high when she giggles, and they both crack up.

‘I rang my dad and said, I’ve got something to tell you, and he said, Have you got your exam results? I said, Dad, I’m pregnant, and he shouted at me: Amabel, you stupid girl! What have you done? I said, It was only a joke, but way to support me when I’m in trouble.’

She’s so funny.

Rosie says, ‘My mum always used to say, Why don’t you get pregnant while you’re still a teenager? So she could look after the baby, because she loves babies.’

‘Why doesn’t she have a baby with Mel?’

‘She’s too old. Plus Mel never wanted children.’

Amma gives Rosie an extra big squeeze. She’s so soft and springy. And very beautiful, and she always has a boyfriend.

‘He adores you, though.’

Zelda drives out of the city and across the river and then after a while they’re in the country with stone walls, fields of beige corn, green fields with sheep and dark green trees and hedges. Their house is down a long track, on a farm. Amma’s room has a big bed Rosie can share. Sometimes Amma talks and shouts in her sleep. Rosie can remember one time Amma woke her by yelling, Happy birthday to me, and sitting up in bed, all without waking.

When Rosie puts her bag in Amma’s room she presses the tummy of her new bear to hear her mum’s voice saying Rosie is the best daughter ever and she loves her to the end of time and back. She wonders if her mum’s listening to the bear Rosie gave her. She sends her a quick text.

Mum texts back: Love u more than roses have a gr8 time xxxxxxxx

Rosie and Amma lie on rugs in the garden. They’ve been there about an hour when a huge brown bird with yellow eyes hits the grass right in front of them. Its feet are gripping the neck of a pigeon that flaps in a weak and feeble way, but the more it flaps the harder the bird squeezes with its claws. It notices them, not in a scared way but more like an evil teacher at school, and beats the air with its own wings to drag the pigeon into a clump of nettles. It’s wild and

fierce and some people would identify with it but Rosie feels more like the pigeon.

‘Oh my god!’ Amma clutches Rosie’s arm and rushes her inside the house.

They sit on her bed and eat Maltezers and listen to indie music. Rosie forgets to feel miserable until they go to a sort of gathering across the fields by the river, because it’s Saturday night. Amma says they don’t have to go and Rosie wishes they could just sit in the hay bales and talk, but she can tell Amma wants to go. Like with some people you could say, You go, I’ll stay here, and they’d be fine about it, but Amma is so caring she wouldn’t leave Rosie.

So they walk down across the sheep field, with Rosie holding Amma’s hand to protect her from sheep. When they go through the kissing-gate, Amma kisses her. Then they follow a path between trees to a stony beach where people have made a fire, which is magic as the dark comes down.

Amma’s mates are friendly and the ones Rosie has met before give her a hug, and somebody plays guitar but she doesn’t know the words. Plus even if she did, she can’t sing in tune. People pass round bottles of cider but she doesn’t want to drink out of the same bottle in case somebody has a cold sore or gum disease or something, so she reminds herself her mum said, That’s not paranoid, it’s sensible.

She says, ‘No thanks, I’m not thirsty.’

There are loads of midges, which make her worry about insect bites and wish she’d coated herself with insect repellent. She misses her mum and her own friends who know she has to disinfect her hands before she eats anything. She’s sixteen so she shouldn’t be wishing she was at home instead of out in the dark with a magic fire and new people. She feels knackered and she’s going to die and they don’t even know.

Amma is leaning against her boyfriend and everybody’s laughing and joking and Rosie’s trying to join in but after a while she goes and lies down on the grass. She wants to fall asleep but she’s too cold. She clasps her hand round her locket, and that makes her feel a bit better.

She feels so weird on and off all weekend, like the stones in her throat and stomach are getting bigger. Sometimes she forgets all about them while she has a

laugh with Amma or learns to ride Zelda's horse, but other times they get so hard and heavy, like when Amma starts talking about GCSEs. Not like she did brilliantly, but she doesn't seem to care. Rosie could re-sit the ones she failed, but her mum says she shouldn't have to and she's going to appeal. She keeps missing her mum, which makes her mad. She knows she ought to tell Zelda and Amma, but on the other hand if she doesn't tell them it doesn't have to be true.

On Monday they're lying out in the front garden on a blanket when Zelda calls Amma in to the phone and then sits on the rug and asks, 'What's up, baby? Remember, I'm your fairy godmother so you can tell me anything.'

Rosie's trying not to cry. She can't tell Zelda in case she gets too upset, or feels angry that Rosie didn't tell her before. She goes, 'I know it's really stupid, but I miss my mum and I want to go home.'

'That's not stupid, Rosie.'

Zelda has her arms round her and Rosie's crying.

They make all these calls and Rosie asks her mum to tell Zelda about the doctors saying her treatment hasn't worked and Zelda says she already knew and she tells Amma and they're all hugging and crying. It's a relief. Mel wants to go home from Edinburgh so he'll meet her on the train tomorrow.

Edinburgh has always struck Mel as an elegant, glamorous city imbued with gothic splendour by amazing buildings stacked at different levels, besides all the enticing movies and opportunities to bump into stars at openings and parties. But this year it seems cold and gloomy. Fog rises from dank abysses to the lonely heights of tenements. Halfway through getting incredibly drunk on tequila shots at a Mexican-themed party on Sunday night, he phones Jay on the old Motorola he usually keeps in the car for emergencies.

'Who is it? What?' She sounds as if she was asleep.

'I love you, I miss you.'

'I love you too. It's really late. What is it?'

'I feel so miserable.'

She's always asking him to tell her how he's feeling. Trying to get away from the noise of the party he blunders through some curtains onto a balcony.

The lights below look misty, maybe because he's not wearing glasses. The phone almost slips from his fingers. He clamps it against his ear.

‘—Of course you feel miserable.’

‘I miss you and Rosa. I bought this book on bereavement. I’ve been looking at all the bizarre feelings I might have. About ninety per cent of couples split up after they lose a child and I feel worried about us splitting up.’

A pause. Maybe he's lost the signal. Then she says, ‘Mel, if we split up it’ll be because you cheated on me and went off with some other woman, not because Rosie dies.’

Too harsh. A punch in the face. He wishes he hadn’t phoned. They end the call somehow and he carries on knocking back tequila until Drew hauls him into a taxi and then bundles him into their apartment. He finishes the evening kneeling on polished black marble tiles, puking into the black toilet.

Next morning it keeps running through his mind as an argument with himself: she’s especially sensitive about lies and abandonment because of being told her father had gone away when in fact he’d died. She needs to grow up and get over it. He had a hard time as a kid but he refuses to drag it around with him. She loves him. She’s bound to apologise.

She phones to ask if he’ll meet Rosa at Newcastle tomorrow and bring her home. He’ll have to pay full price for a ticket but his bank balance will stand the expense. He doesn’t even mind getting up early. He bags a seat for Rosa and phones to tell her which carriage he’s in. At Newcastle he gets off and seizes Rosa’s case. Once she’s on the train he hugs her while people shove past.

He can’t stop looking at her. She looks so well. Although she’s not as dark as she usually turns in summer her skin has a healthy glow, the colour of Americano coffee with milk. She’s so beautiful, even in her hideous brown jumper over jeans. Film-star beautiful, although she resembles no actor he can think of; stars such as Dorothy Dandridge had more European features. Her hair is short and curly with brown strands: he doesn’t know if they’re an effect of the radiotherapy or added in by the hairdresser. She’s wearing a black beret on the back of her head, probably one his mother knitted. Her face is heart-shaped like Jay’s, with dark eyebrows, big dark eyes and a wide smile. Her voice is soft, husky and gorgeous. She’s enthusing about riding Zelda’s horse and going to

some party with Amma. She's so happy to see him. He can't believe she's going to die. It's completely and absolutely wrong.

She says, 'I'm really sorry you had to leave the festival early. I know how much you love it.'

'The truth is, darlin, I'm just as happy to go home. It wasn't the same this year.'

'I can't wait to see Mum. How sad am I? A sixteen year old who misses her mum after one day away.'

He feels an ache of jealousy that she adores Jay without reservation. A childish reaction: not the kind of thing he could ever admit to anyone: not even Siouxsie or Jay.

At the restaurant, Jay chooses whitebait and cod. Mel orders the duck confit and foie gras terrine with homemade brioche and orange salad, followed by free-range pork loin steak.

He spreads butter on sourdough.

'No thanks.' She shakes her head when he nudges the breadbasket towards her. 'We went to—'

The waiter brings the wine. Even though Jay selected it, he shows the bottle to Mel and murmurs, 'Would you like to taste?'

Mel indicates Jay's glass.

Jay says, 'I'm sure it's fine.' She takes a sip and says, 'Yummy. Thanks. We went to clinic and talked to Dr Baldwin. I like him. He listens to Rosie and he doesn't say, That's ridiculous, to ask about some treatment you saw on telly or on the internet. He said the weed I asked about might be relevant if Rosie had a different kind of chromosome disorder, not monosomy seven, where one strand is missing on chromosome number seven. Martha sent me a picture, it looked like footprints, I thought she'd made a mistake and sent me the choreography for her tango class or something. The seventh step only had one foot. But Dr Baldwin's going to get in touch with Birmingham anyway. He said asking the donor for more white cells isn't a good idea because of serious GVHD, or something.'

He wishes that for once they didn't have to talk about Rosa's illness.

‘Also he’s going to find out about another drug called myelotarg that’s in trials in Cardiff, I think, for patients with relapsed AML. And about trials of something called azacytidine where your hair doesn’t fall out, because he knows somebody from med school at King’s College Hospital in London. He thinks it might be having good results with monosomy seven.’

The food is fabulous. They eat, drink and talk. Jay tells him about her job interview. He tells her about the Friends of IFH and their campaign to keep the cinema open. About Ellen Pipe and her covert campaign to close it, in league with Lonnie.

‘Why do you hate Lonnie?’

‘Because he’s an arsehole. Although he’s not so bad lately.’

‘Why are you so determined to keep the cinema going when work’s always stressing you out?’

‘I’ve had this job fifteen years. It’s worth fighting for.’

‘Rosie and I reckon that you project all your anxiety about Rosie dying onto your work and the cinema closing down.’

He reaches across to taste a forkful of the smoked-bacon bubble-and-squeak that accompanied her fish. She holds his hand. She’s a bit drunk. He pulls away to replace his fork on his plate and then takes her hand again. He’s not sure cod psychology is any help to anybody. Why cod? Because it’s so simplistic it could only apply to a brain as miniscule as that of a fish?

‘What do you think happens when you die?’ she asks.

He hopes she’s not going to cry.

‘I need a cigarette.’ He says it before he removes his hand, so that she won’t take it personally.

He huddles in the entrance to the building next door to smoke. A chilly wind blows off the dark water. Metal clinks against masts. He’s trying so hard to be there for her. The trouble with feelings is that they alter from day to day; articulating them in words that he communicates to another person weighs them down and makes them too solid.

Back at the table, she asks again, ‘What happens after you die?’

‘Nothing happens, love. Your body goes back into the earth, or turns to ashes.’

‘What about the part of you that makes you recognisably you, even though every single cell in your body gets replaced every seven years?’

‘It’s a physical thing, some kind of nexus of energy. Like a magnet draws iron filings so they all face in the same direction. It dissolves when you die. I don’t think it’s in fact true that every cell of your body renews itself: brain cells, for instance, last a lifetime and when they’re gone they’re gone. I want a coffee.’

He pours the last of the wine into her glass and tries to catch the waiter’s attention. He doesn’t hear her phone but she extracts it from her bag.

‘Rosie. I’ll ring her back... Hey gorgeous. You have a good time?... Yeah, lovely....No, we’ve finished eating...See you soon. Love you.’

A waiter appears.

‘Espresso, please.’ He rolls a cigarette.

‘Nothing else, thanks.’ She slurps from her water glass. ‘I wish you’d marry me, or jump the broom with me, to say we’ll stay together a year. Or have a party and declare your love. Ever since you dumped me for Cara, I want you to show me some commitment.’

‘I do love you.’

The guy brings his coffee. Jay folds the chocolate mints into her hankie.

They take a taxi back to hers. Rosa comes downstairs in her PJs as they go inside.

‘You two look happy. I love it when you’re happy.’

Jay waltzes her into the lounge. They all collapse on the settee and Jay gives Rosa the mints.

‘We are so mature. We’ve been talking about the meaning of life and everything,’ Jay says.

‘Somehow that doesn’t make you sound mature,’ he can’t help saying.

‘I’m not going to eat the dark chocolate ones. So what is the meaning of life?’ Rosa asks.

‘What do you reckon, babes?’

‘I don’t know,’ she answers slowly. ‘I can’t make sense of it: why I was born, why I’ve been so ill.’

She must get it from Jay: talking about all this heavy shit as though it’s normal. Or maybe women really are different. He could do with a brandy.

‘If nothing else,’ says Jay, ‘you’ve helped me and Mel to learn to love you, and each other.’

That’s true: he never meant to love Rosa, or be anyone’s father, but he couldn’t help himself.

Rosa speaks through a mouthful of chocolate: ‘Vonnegut gave me a CD that says stuff like: You may not understand the story you are weaving, but you can accept it. Be at peace, because your best is always good enough. Which is bollocks. Sometimes your best just isn’t good enough. Sometimes the story you’re weaving is a load of absolute drivel that gets a Fail and a, See me after the lesson.’

Jay’s had a headache for six days. After she drops Rosie and Mel at the station, she weeps and weeps and her headache disappears.

She can feel a cord that reaches from her heart to Rosie’s, it stretches too tight as Rosie travels away from her but at least Rosie will be safe with Zelda.

Jay met Zelda when she started secondary school, her mother sent Beth to boarding school because she was difficult but Jay won a scholarship to a private girls’ grammar where Zelda’s mother was the matron. Zelda was crazy about horses and show jumping but apart from her equine obsession she matched Jay’s soul, they visited art galleries together, climbed trees, listened to Fairport Convention, Aretha Franklin and The Cream. They lost touch when Jay veered into a haze of drugs and alcohol, left home and slept in homeless shelters: The Mad Years. Jay met Zelda again by chance, after the Teepee Years, when she went to art school in Newcastle to learn film and video. Zelda was teaching painting, Zelda got married to Kenny and gave birth to Amma three months after Jay had Rosie. When Jay lost her job and her house, Zelda and Kenny took her in, Sharing a house with toddlers made them even closer.

Jay clips back shrubs in the garden on Sunday and works on her portfolio, she borrowed a digital SLR so she can say she’s used one but most of her prints are from thirty-five mil film. She prepares for her interview at Suffolk Country magazine because she can’t bring herself to phone and cancel, as if turning down the possibility of a job and a life apart from Rosie would mean accepting that Rosie is going to die soon.

On Monday she irons a white shirt and puts on one of her old suits from the RHP. Her mascara isn't in the bathroom cabinet, she'd bet fifty quid that Rosie's borrowed it, she wants to ring Rosie and shout at her, she wishes Rosie would hurry up and die and then at least Jay would be able to keep track of her own possessions and earn a living. She hunts in Rosie's room but can't find her mascara, she makes do with eyeshadow, blusher and lipstick.

The interview's in one of those black-and-white half-timbered buildings that look as though they must house organisations that are antiquated and arcane, on the first floor all the rooms have been knocked together to form an office with computer stations, photocopiers and fax machines, you wouldn't think they'd get planning permission. Layers of photos and printed sheets on the walls flutter in the breeze from an open window. Jay follows a woman whose name she immediately forgets into a cubicle divided from the main office by glass. The exterior window is leaded and doesn't open so the room is hot, the man who stands up to shake her hand smells of sweat as well as aftershave.

The woman, the Creative Director, introduces the man who is Production Editor, whose name also refuses to stick. Jay takes a seat and hands over her portfolio. The woman has shiny hair, eyeliner and mascara, thin lips and for fuck's sake a pearl necklace above a black shirt with a line of white buttons from her left collarbone to the right-hand side of her waist. The man is wearing a white shirt and a tie, she can't even tell what he looks like because all White men in shirts and ties look the same to her.

While they leaf through her portfolio she doesn't feel nervous because how scary can an interview be compared with hospitals, bone marrow transplants and terminal prognoses? Her mind is desperately computing ways to make it all work, so she can do a job, earn a living and not let Rosie die.

'I know it's part time,' she says, 'but I wondered what the salary would be, because it didn't say in the job description.'

The man looks up and says, 'Oh yes, we'll come to that.'

They ask her questions, not the questions for which she'd prepared answers but fronting up makes her feel capable and professional. She realises that her digital landscape shots are no more than adequate but their comments on what she thinks of as her Cézanne apples renew her own enthusiasm for her experiments with light, colour and depth of field. When it's her turn to ask

questions, she's surprised to find out how small the staff is: in addition to the Creative Director, who oversees features, and the Production Editor, who's in charge of the money, there are a couple of advertising people, a contributing features editor, an artwork and layout person, the publishers and printers are based elsewhere. The team produces not only Suffolk Country but also Norfolk Country and Essex Country. Jay's job would consist of taking photos to accompany features, editing submissions from the general public and obtaining stock images. She'd be expected to provide her own transport. She lies through her teeth, she tells them she loves Suffolk Country and has her own car. She doesn't want to photograph wealthy people's houses or business ventures, she misses Gurdev and Liz at the RHP, she wants to include the photos she had to leave out of her portfolio: lager cans and crisp packets in beauty spots; Rosie in hospital. But on the other hand the job would give her experience of working as a photographer which is the general direction she wants her life to take, avoiding the passionate loves and hatreds evoked by racism and anti-racist work, avoiding its dangers, everyone in the team had to go ex-directory after Kurtin received death threats on his home phone.

The interview seems to be drawing to a close, it looks as though they might offer her the post, smiles ricochet around the stuffy cubicle. Jay panics all of a sudden, this isn't real, she can't tell what's real and what isn't. What will she do if they make her an offer? She needs to look after Rosie, devote all her energy to finding a miracle.

She says for the second time, 'I really need to know what the salary would be.'

The woman looks Jay in the eye. 'It's thirteen thousand five hundred to start with.'

'That's the part-time rate?' Jay asks. 'So it'd be pro rata for twenty... twenty-seven thousand?'

The man says, 'No, thirteen five hundred full time, so that makes it six seven fifty.'

Jay can't help herself, she lets out a guffaw of derision. After which she shakes hands and takes her leave in a dignified manner.

At home she has lunch and then Rosie rings to say she misses her too much, Mel says he'll bring her home, it's all she wants, to be with Rosie and Mel.

Ten

Miss Elliot gives me a tick and writes great next to my poem. Miss Elliot is only as tall as the tallest girl in our class and she has rounded edges and is very kind.

My poem says:

There's a monster under my bed

He tried to bite off my leg!!

There's a ghost behind my curtains

I'm sure I'm positive I'm certain!!

There's a vampire behind my door

It's my blood he's going to draw!!

There's a mummy under my desk

Tonight I'll get no rest!

What's that? Its light! hoorray it's morning

The monsters have gone without warning.

The secretary walks in with the new girl.

Miss Elliot says, 'This is Bonita. Her family's moved here from London. I want you all to welcome her, and invite her to join your games.' She looks round the class and catches my eye. 'Rosie, please will you be Bonita's friend and show her round, especially at lunch and playtime.'

I can't believe it! Mrs Sulter never asked me but Miss Elliot says I'm reliable and clever and kind. The new girl has long fair hair and blue eyes like all the princesses in all the fairy stories. I have brown skin, dark brown eyes and very curly black hair like Rosie in our readers about Rosie and Sam in Year Two. Some of the kids at school believed the books were written about me. Bonita is a fairy princess while I'm a Year Two school reader.

People move so she can sit next to me. She even has a pretty name like a girl in a story. I expect she'll come round with me today and then make other friends. She seems kind of shy and quiet.

That's in school, though, or when there are grownups around. By the time Christmas arrives I know she's a wild girl. She laughs like anything. When we go round hers we play with her cousins in the multi-storey car park and we are Buffy the Vampire Slayer and the Scooby Gang, except I don't like watching Buffy because I don't like horror films. Mum said to Mel, We have enough horror in our own lives, we don't need to watch it in movies. Mel said it's funny.

They make me be Xander because I have dark hair. That's better than being a vampire. The vampires are pretend. You kill them with a stake through their hearts, which is a piece of wood. I remember when I got pneumonia Mel said, People can die from pneumonia, and I was really scared and I couldn't sleep. This year I hate my injections but I haven't been ill at all.

Bonita lives with her mum. She steals a cigarette and lights it in the car park. She puffs out smoke and then she passes it to me. I say I don't want to smoke. She says I am a little baby scaredy-cat but I say I have needles in my hand and X-rays, and smoking can kill you so it's stupid to smoke. I think maybe she won't be my friend after that but she carries on as normal.

When we go round mine we walk to the shop and buy crisps and The Beano. That's what I tell my mother except really we buy sweets and eat them at the allotments. My best ones are the white chocolate buttons but sometimes we only have enough money for pink shrimps or the chews that taste funny. We go home and get my mum's bras and fill them with socks to see what we'll look like when our boobs grow. Bonita says they are tits. She has a boyfriend but I don't.

Rosie's wearing her scoop-neck raspberry spider's-web jumper with the pom-poms over a black top and dark jeans, with her new pink Timberland boots and a black scarf and beret. They all made a solemn vow to wear jeans on the first day of term. Because they can. She forced Megs, Feebs and Barbie to make a pact not to mention dying but behave as normal at all times, but it still feels awkward.

When Patrick gives her a hug she tries not to feel self-conscious about whether Aaron's looking. They have red planners and they can use the common room for study periods, or the library or a private study room. She has all her subjects today and a study period: that is how it's marked in their planners: Period 4 1.55-3.10pm, but they don't like saying periods because the boys all used to go, Girls have periods. They faff around for half of the first period, writing their subjects in and looking round the common room.

Feebs stands next to Joe and swishes her hair attractively because she's still with him.

'Oh wow,' she says with added sarcasm, 'we can make coffee. How fortunate, to have communal facilities.'

Which makes Rosie wonder whether communal, or perhaps facilities, is her word for the week. She'll have to pay attention.

When they're choosing lockers she realises that Aaron is standing next to her, so that all of a sudden instead of breathing being something that happens automatically she has to remind herself to breathe in and out while her heart does a little tap dance and she can feel the pulses in her wrists. He smells of aftershave and she wonders whether he shaves every day. He's quite tall so she only reaches up to his shoulder. Shoulder height. Weird how boys are the same size or smaller in Year Seven but by Year Twelve they've grown enormous.

'W'appen, Rose-is-a-Rose?' He tugs one of her raspberry pom-poms in a friendly way.

It's obvious that he doesn't know yet and she wonders whether he'll still be relaxed with her when he finds out. She wants to ask what subjects he's doing but her voice is going to come out funny. Answer him. Hurry up.

'This is the perfect locker. Elbow height,' she says, and smiles.

'I'm next to you.'

He must have heard about her and Patrick kissing at Prom and now he's more interested. Boys are like dogs. Siouxsie's dog always wants anything you have, like a stick you pick up more than one that's lying around on the ground.

She writes Rosie in her special handwriting on a card. She wants to make a joke but she can't think of one.

'I've got Photography first lesson, and then Psychology and then Performance Studies. They all begin with p.'

Barbie butts in. 'Except it's not Performance Studies, you retard, it's actually Drama and Theatre Studies.'

'I'm doing Music Tech, ICT, Business Studies and Media Communications. None of them start with p,' says Aaron.

Damnation. Never mind, at least she'll be able to concentrate. She slides her card into the slot. They have to provide their own padlocks. The inside door of her locker has bits of old blu-tack stuck to it.

Feebs is doing Photography too, so they wander across to the Tech building together. They'll have two different teachers, one for lens-based photography and experimental darkroom practice and the other for digital imaging. Rosie didn't do GCSE Art so she had to complete a photography task while she was in exile and hand it in. She researched Tina Modotti and described two of her photos using art vocabulary, and shot a roll of black-and-white film trying to emulate Tina Modotti's style. Modotti's photographs are extremely expressive, which means even photos that only show someone's hands moving puppets, or folded on the handle of a spade or washing clothes, reveal a lot about people. They're like portraits. Tina Modotti's actual portraits are powerful, especially one of a woman wearing black shawl around her face, like the face shows more because it's isolated from the background etcetera etcetera. She photographed poor people, and not really white people, not people in advertisements or magazines but real people. Rosie got her mum to wear a long black coat and a shawl and pose in the cemetery on a cold day. Her mum was

embarrassed about her hands because they have veins and wrinkles and brown spots, except Rosie told her they have more character. She wishes they still had their darkroom but now she'll get to use the darkrooms at school. They have to provide their own thirty-five millimetre SLRs and someone at Mel's work gave her one because everybody's got digital now.

Aaron tugged her pom-pom. He chose the locker next to hers.

Today is an introduction and they have to make notes. There's something lovely about beginning a new small notebook in her best handwriting: The word photography comes from the latin words Photo Graphis. Photo translates as light, and graphis as drawing. Photography literally means drawing with light. But she wants to get on to actually taking her own photos and printing them. Apature is how wide the lens is open – determining how much light comes through. A wide apature lets in a lot of light and Visa Versa. They get to take the lens off their camera and look at the aperture opening and closing, the same when they do shutter speed except it clicks so fast you can't actually see it. They finish up with f stops on the camera, which you also have on the enlarger in the dark room.

'I hear the darkroom facilities are excellent,' murmurs Feebs.

Her word must be facilities.

Their homework is shoot a roll of film, writing down the f stop and shutter speed for each exposure. Aaron tugged her pom-pom. Also experiment with a wide aperture and fast shutter speed or a narrow aperture and slow shutter speed to see the different effects on blurred movement of a waterfall or something. Which sounds totally interesting and not like homework at all. Where is a waterfall round here? Rosie writes it in her planner. She wants to write her Norfolk weekend where she's going to celebrate her life with friends and family and her spa weekend with Siouxsie but everybody else is already leaving. Crap. Stuff everything in her bag. She's got to find S10 in the sixth-form centre, while Feebs is going next door to Art.

Rosie starts to run but she gets too out of breath because her haemoglobin's low. She'll have a blood test for cross matching on Wednesday lunchtime and then her transfusion on Thursday.

Megs has saved her a place near the front, which is lucky because Rosie's forgotten to bring her new glasses. Megs' fringe falls in her eyes so she keeps tossing her head. She does it first to the left and then to the right every time. Rosie wants to ask if she's growing it out but she needs to pay attention.

They're going to study behavioural, physiological, psychodynamic and cognitive psychology. First of all they're going to have an introduction to the basic assumptions of each approach and then they'll look at them in more depth, including core studies and applied research methods. Cognitive psychology looks at your mental processes such as language and memory. The human brain can be compared to a computer as an information processor. When you receive, interpret and respond to information, these processes can be tested by means of case studies and laboratory experiments. They're going to look in depth at whether eyewitness testimony is reliable or unreliable. Aaron chose the locker next to Rosie's. He must like her.

The physiological approach emphasises the importance of genetic inheritance and the nervous system. Methods used include brain scanning, EEG, lesioning and ablation. Megs scrawls a big question mark next to ablation and nudges Rosie, who writes ~~feck~~ nose at the top of her paper. Her hand is cramping and she's getting a sore place on the side of her middle finger just under the nail. She nudges Megs. Megs twitches. Rosie points to her finger and Megs writes: ~~He's going to give us a handout~~. How can she be sure? Rosie starts writing again. She's missed a bit, but at least it's not entirely new because she and Megs both did Child Development GCSE, which is one of those Minnie-Mouse subjects like Food Tech that people think you only do if you're going to get a low-paid job like nursery nurse or dinner lady or be a full-time mother. Which is really stupid because, for one, bringing children up has to be one of the most important jobs ever for the future of the world, so two, why is it low paid? And also because, three, you learn a lot about psychology, for example Piaget, who they have to study again for A-level psychology.

The behavioural approach, also called the learning approach, states that all behaviours are learned and emphasises the influence of interaction with the environment. Research methods include laboratory experiments and animal

learning studies. They will look in detail at the contemporary issue of the effects of violence in the media on children's behaviour.

Rosie feels relieved when it's time for break. They flock to their common room, amazed with the wondrous newness of it all, but as it's too crowded and a lovely day they trundle outside where everybody who hasn't already met up compares exam results. Rosie tries to avoid answering questions about hers because her mum is going to have a meeting with Miss Duckett and Mr Bloor, who is Examinations Officer, and Peter's mother because he was ill too. Because Rosie didn't actually get an A-C grade in Maths or Science. She got A* for English, A for Drama, B for English Literature and B for Child Development but she missed some of her exams so she got zero marks for those components. Mum says they should award her a grade that reflects the work she put in together with predicted grades from her mocks.

She sits on the wall and asks other people, which is quite easy because people mostly want to talk about themselves anyway, plus everyone knows Rosie had leukaemia. At least the school let her into sixth form which is a, she can't think of the word, something you give somebody because you think they deserve it even though they haven't got the right grades or qualifications. Aaron got good grades. He doesn't sit next to Rosie on the wall.

At the Performing Arts Centre, in the changing room, Barbie is like some kind of uber warrior woman with breasts and muscles and matching underwear, or maybe like Cordelia in Buffy, while Rosie has to keep her jumper on even when it's hot outside so her muffin top won't show. The girls' changing room smells of feet and fannies and body spray. She feels better in her jogging bottoms. They go into the studio. It's Dance today so they have Mrs Evans.

She gets them doing a warm-up, which is immediately much better than sitting around, even though Rosie feels a bit out of breath and achey. Mrs Evans joins in with them. She's so interested in everybody and so enthusiastic about theatre and dance, plus she's not all skinny or muscly but quite short and a bit plump and an amazing dancer. She says call her Ruby. She plays a video of a man and a woman doing ballet dancing to music that sounds like the guys in woolly hats with earflaps who play outside the Corn Exchange. It has Spanish words, and two skeleton creatures come and take the man away.

‘This is an excerpt from a production of Ghost Dances, which was created and choreographed by Christopher Bruce for the Rambert Dance Company in 1981. We’re going to design, choreograph and present our own version of this dance...’

Woh!

‘Has anyone heard of the Mexican Day of the Dead?’

Rosie puts her hand up because Mel has a skeleton riding on a banana on his shelves. He collects bananas like some people collect elephants. And at home they’ve got that framed postcard of a skeleton with birds perched on it and roses growing out of it, and her mum always makes offerings to the gods and their ancestors, including Granjee, on Halloween, only of course Rosie doesn’t say that in front of everybody.

When the class is finished and she’s dressed she hangs around outside until Mrs Evans, Ruby, except it’s difficult to think of her as Ruby, comes out. She asks how Rosie’s doing.

‘The doctors told me my treatment didn’t work and I haven’t got long to live.’

‘Oh Rosie. I’m so sorry. Can I have a hug?’

As Rosie lets go of her she’s crying, which Rosie kind of likes because she knows Mrs Evans really cares, but also it feels terrible to make a teacher cry. So Rosie points out her pink Timberlands to cheer Mrs Evans up. Mrs Evans totally admires them.

All in all Rosie’s first day back at school turns out not to be as difficult as she feared.

The Norfolk weekend was terrible, Rosie wanted to celebrate her life but how could they celebrate having to tell friends and family that she’s going to die? Zelda and Amma brought adhesive moustaches to make people laugh and they cooked sausages on the beach. All the colours seem to have spun together until all that’s left is white light that contrasts with the no-colour of bleak despair.

Jay needs to talk to Mel before they go for their weekend break but they don’t have a moment to themselves, she thinks about Rosie every minute of every day, she wants the comfort of making love but she refuses to have noisy,

joyful sex when Rosie's in the next room and hasn't got a boyfriend just as she refuses to grow her hair long if Rosie's hair won't grow.

Finally Jay and Mel are alone together, at the hotel. On Saturday morning, after she goes for a pee, Jay snuggles back into bed.

Mel rolls out. 'I need to make another cup of tea.'

'I want to give you a cuddle.'

'In a minute.' He carries the kettle into the bathroom.

She raises her voice so he can hear over the tap running. 'I'm confused because you wanted us to be there for each other but as soon as I get into bed, you leave.'

He comes back and plugs the kettle in. 'I'm not leaving, I'm just making a cup of tea.'

'I really need to talk to you.'

'I'm in the same room.' He's standing with his back to her.

'It's like you care more about being right than about us getting on together.'

'I'm confused because when I do talk to you, you push me away.'

'I'm confused too.' She slides her legs off the bed.

He sits down next to her, he puts his arm round her.

She says, 'I need to know what's going on for you. I'm not a mind reader.'

'What kind of thing don't I let you know?' he asks, into her hair.

'If there's something you're happy about, something you're afraid of, something you feel angry about,' which makes two negative emotions after only one positive, so she'd better dredge up another positive. 'Or something you're hoping for.'

'I'm hoping for a cup of tea.' He stands and carries the teapot into the bathroom..

'I could give her a quick ring, remind her to take her afternoon medicine.' Jay wanders out of the bathroom with a towel round her hair and another tucked in over her breasts.

‘She’ll be fine. Siouxsie’s got a list. Come and lie down.’ Mel needs some physical contact. It’s the first time he and Jay have gone anywhere on their own since...he can’t remember.

‘Want a cup of tea?’

‘Later. I want you. We’ve got time before dinner. Take off your towel.’

‘I’m glad you’re short sighted.’ Jay unwraps herself and wiggles her hips in a mock-seductive dance. Or perhaps a sincerely seductive dance except she hams it up; she twists her arms and hands in flowing curves and then sways her torso to and fro like a pastiche of an Egyptian mural. The wet towel falls off her head.

‘You mean, so I can’t see the wrinkles?’

‘Face it, I’m gorgeous.’ She slides onto the bed and presses her breasts and her hips against him. Her hair will make the pillows wet.

They have sex but after she comes she rolls off, gets up to go to the loo and then pulls the duvet over herself. She either dozes or pretends to be asleep. She’s never left him unsatisfied before. He’s not sure what’s going on. Perhaps she wants him to save himself for later, like when she got the book on Tantric sex which told him to reserve his emissions in order to protract his pleasure. Perhaps if he has a wank she’ll get turned on and join in.

Eleven

I am ten and the summer lasts forever and ever. I'm allowed to go out with my friends as long as we stay together. Tom shows us where we can fold up the bottom of the fence near his house. The fence is stiff. It's made of thick wire that criss crosses. The signs say DANGER KEEP OUT so I feel scared. Tom goes through first, then Bonita, then Aaron, then Clarrie and Frankie, then me. Damian holds the wire for me and goes last. He used to be Bonita's boyfriend. They went to the pictures together and held hands but now Aaron is her boyfriend. I want a boyfriend because all my friends have one.

Tom says, 'Shush.'

We have to follow the person in front's footsteps so people can't see we've gone in. Bonita copies how Tom walks and then everybody copies her. When we get behind some bushes we spread out. We find sticks to slash through the nettles and brambles. I'm glad I'm wearing my dungarees and trainers. I don't tell anybody about the brambles because that is for me and Amma.

We stick strings of goosegrass to each other's clothes like camouflage in the jungle. We whisk flies away with branches off a bush that has green berries, the same kind my mum uses when they turn black to make a drink. We reach some bricks and a kind of floor that Tom says used to be a house. It feels even more scary because it used to be a house where a girl like me could watch telly and eat her tea and go to bed but now it is nothing. Somebody has made a fire there. The ashes smell like vinegar. Tom gets a stick that was burned in the fire and finds a piece of board. He writes DANGER KEEP OUT and draws a skull and crossbones.

'This is the Scooby camp.'

Bonita says, 'I'm the vampire slayer and you have to bring me treasure. Aaron, make me a throne.'

She's laughing but she means it. She gets Clarrie to give her her mobile phone. She'll have to give it back later.

‘Show me what’s in your locket,’ she commands.

‘You can’t open it.’ I don’t tell her it’s got laughter inside.

‘Let me see.’

I sit next to her on the concrete that used to be the floor of the house. She tries to open it.

‘Let me wear it. While we’re in the Scooby kingdom.’

‘I’m not allowed to take it off, because I’m always losing things. I’ll make you a crown.’

I pick daisies and pink flowers with petals like claws from cracks in the concrete. The daisies smell dirty but the pink ones smell like honey. I poke my thumbnail to make a hole in the stalk and slide another stalk through. The last one, the one that closes the circle, is the hardest. I put it on Bonita’s hair. I am an ordinary daisy while she is a beautiful lily. But Damian brings me a blackberry. The first ripe one. I eat it even though I don’t really like blackberries. The pips get in your teeth and sometimes they have worms.

On the way home he asks me to go out with him. He’s my boyfriend but we don’t go out anywhere. He phones me but I’d rather watch telly because he’s not so much fun as girls, so I ask my mother to say I’m not in. She says that’s not very nice. Having a boyfriend is a nuisance. Bonita says Damian is the Antichrist in some horror movie. I don’t know what that is but it seems weird to call your kid after somebody in a horror movie.

Bonita comes for a sleepover and we jump on the bed and do makeovers. Her mum has got married and me and Mum went to their wedding but Mel didn’t go because he doesn’t believe in marriage. My mum doesn’t believe in Father Christmas. I think it’s really Mel creeping in after midnight but I still want a stocking.

We go in Year Six and we are cool and we rule. We learn about the Second World War, which is very sad and scary. When we go to Shoreham I interview Mel’s mum because she was alive. His dad, Derek, was alive too but he doesn’t really want to talk about it. Betty felt mad when they shut her school because of the war. She had to leave school when she was fourteen to work in a factory where they made jam. After they ran out of sugar, the factory made sanitary pads and tampons instead.

We learn about the Holocaust and concentration camps which is too sad. We read a poem about what a lie it is to say it's brave to die for your country. I write a letter to the Prime Minister and ask him to help stop wars because they are wrong and children get killed. I write a poem and it gets published. It's called The Rose of Death.

Crap crap crap and more crap. Rosie said she'd do this once but here she is again. People say she can choose but it's not much of a choice. She wants to have normal teenage problems like falling out with her boyfriend or being asked to take on too many extra hours in her after-school job, not choose between no-treatment-and-dying-in-a-couple-of-months or experimental-chemo-and-maybe-living-six-months-longer.

She ends up choosing experimental chemo and Mel drives them to London. In the car she listens to a story tape from the library about this girl who can see ghosts and communicate with them while other people can't so she has to help sort out their problems. Also she falls in love with one of the ghosts. How come when somebody in a book falls in love with a ghost, either the ghost they love kisses them at the end or the ghost turns out to be the wrong person and the right person kisses them? Rosie thinks Aaron has found out she's going to die because he's gone kind instead of flirty. Which is actually just one more brick of crap in the palace of crap that is her life.

The hospital is in a different part of London and they're going to stay in her mum's friend's flat nearby. There are more black people and more Asian-looking and foreign-looking people and more mixed people like Rosie. It feels weird to think foreign looking when stupid white people have said to her, Go back where you come from. She likes looking at people's hair because there are so many different styles and most would suit her own hair, except some would be too expensive, like when she got extensions it cost a hundred quid on top of buying the hair and took seven hours but it turned out disappointing because you could see the squares of her scalp, not what she hoped for which was so many plaits there'd be no spaces between.

Mel drops them off so he can get home before rush hour.

'Claudia said be careful of your bag and don't talk on your phone round here in case somebody nicks it,' says Mum.

They have to go in past massive rubbish bins, up some concrete stairs and along the first balcony. Claudia's flat at the end has plants outside in pots but all the others have bare brick and grey tarmac stuff. Claudia is away so they get the keys off her neighbour, who tells them, 'It's nice and quiet here,' which is a relief.

Rosie sits and reads her book. The flat is really tidy but not that clean, the opposite of their house which is clean but not tidy. Mum changes the sheets on the spare bed, cleans the bath and the sink and mops the kitchen floor because she says Claudia has health problems and mental problems and needs some help. Great, they've come to stay with a deranged person while Rosie has chemo.

Mum goes out for takeout. Rosie has chicken tikka, chapattis and rice and they watch Hollyoaks and Friends on E4, which they can't get at home, and Mum has a shower.

Rosie mostly likes Hollyoaks because it's quite interesting what the characters get up to, even though she knows it's a stupid programme, like when Russ had cancer of the balls he was really depressed and thought he was going to die but after an operation to have his testicle removed he was perfectly fine, practically next day, and then the whole crisis was over. Being ill isn't like that. At all. Rosie wishes she could watch a programme or read a book that tells you what it is like: the total horror when your body doesn't work and you get an infection and feel like you're disintegrating. And how tiring pain is, even minor pain like when you have a cannula in your hand. And then it gets blocked and they have to find another vein. For starters.

At least she's stopped worrying that the bone marrow transplant will change her into a different person. She got an email from Angela, who's beginning her research, but Rosie isn't really bothered any more. What she worries about now is that living could turn out worse than dying.

She's split into two people: the Rosie she wants to be, a bit shy but friendly, having a laugh with her mates, going round the shops and doing home beauty sessions, trying hard at school because she wants to make something of her life. And the Rosie she hates being, the cancer patient whose life is nothing but illness, pain, blood and needles. Her friends don't understand the other Rosie at all. When she told Megs at the beginning of term she'd dropped Sociology, Megs asked, Why? Rosie wanted to be really sarcastic and go, Because I'm

dying, Megs, and it's too much effort doing five A levels. But she doesn't want to alienate her friends because without them her entire life would be pure crap.

She misses her mum while she goes to the takeaway and again when she's in the shower so when she comes back in the room Rosie stands up and says, 'Big hug. You won't leave me, Mum?'

Mum holds her in her arms and Rosie can feel her heart beating and smell the shower gel they brought from home.

Mum goes, 'I will never go anywhere away from you because I love you from here to the edge of the universe and back. But you can go anywhere you want, because that's normal.'

When she gets out Rosie's medicines and passes them over, Rosie misses one and it drops on the floor. It's her HRT, a tiny round pink pill smaller than a grain of rice. They can't see it even though they kneel down and bend forward with their cheeks practically on the wooden boards. Mum fetches the torch she always packs for hospitals and turns out the lights and shines the torch at floor level so every chunk of spilled food, speck of dust and stray hair looms up all huge and ominous.

'Oh my god, it's like a horror movie. Or How Clean Is Your House. I should have hoovered in here,' Mum says.

They practically wet themselves laughing and then Mum rinses the pill under the tap and Rosie swallows it.

They share the bed, which is comforting in a strange place even though it's not comfortable because it's a futon. And Mum snores. In the morning they get a red double-decker bus. Two men say, 'Mornin',' at the bus stop and people chat in the queue. Rosie always thought London was supposed to be unfriendly but Brixton seems more welcoming even than Ipswich.

They want to admit her to hospital, which means she'll have to stay overnight, but her mum isn't allowed to stay, because Rosie won't be in a children's ward. And she can't go in the children's ward because the children's ward doesn't do chemo.

'Don't worry, babes. They can't force you to stay without me. I'll talk to the doctors. Martha will phone the doctors.'

'Remind me what it is? I remember baseline organ function tests because it sounds like music. Baseline is somebody playing the bass, and organ is the

organ, and function tests is the sound check. Like when we watched Aaron's band set up at the Railway.'

'It means scans, and full blood and bone marrow before you start the trial. So they know how your kidneys and liver and everything are working, so they'll know if the azacytidine affects anything.'

They walk along a corridor like a tunnel that smells of school dinners and then go up in a lift to the second floor. It's all strange. Hospitals are scary. She doesn't mind Ipswich because she knows everyone and they love her. The corridors up here are clean and shiny and beige and they have to ring the bell and wait to be let into the ward. They give her a room to herself even though they said all the patients here are neutropenic and she'd have to share. They do the usual faffing-around, obs, find-a-vein business. Her mum gets mad because they do her bone marrow aspirate and biopsy in the room.

She goes, 'Way to make you feel safe.'

She gives Rosie hypericum to stop the pain.

A nurse in a navy tunic promises the next test won't hurt at all and takes Rosie to a whole other part of the hospital while her mum rushes to sort out the visiting-hours-or-keeping-Rosie-company debacle. Even though Rosie feels scared on her own she's determined to stay strong.

The nurse leaves and a man comes out and fetches her into a room with a doughnut machine, which is a scanner shaped like a doughnut not a machine that makes doughnuts, worse luck.

'Take your jacket off and lay it on the table. Are you wearing any jewellery, or an underwired bra?'

She knows better than to wear anything except big knickers and one of Mum's bra-tops under her clothes in hospital. It takes her a while to extricate herself from her Bench jacket, because of her cannula. The man goes out. When he comes back he starts to peel off the tape over the cannula.

'What you doing?'

'I have to take this off.'

'Why?'

He huffs, like, 'Huh!' Then he says, 'I have to put X-ray-sensitive dye through, and if I push it through this tube, it's going to blow.'

'Why would it blow?'

‘Because the pressure’s too high.’

‘I don’t understand why you’re taking my cannula out when they only just put it in.’

He huffs again. ‘I’m not, I’m just taking this bit off.’

‘Oh. So why d’you have to put the dye through?’

He huffs. Like, Stupid kid, asking all these questions. But it’s Rosie’s life and her body, so you’d think people could explain what they’re doing.

Her mum says she saw the ward manager and she’s allowed to stay but somebody’s got to talk to Rosie. A woman with braids sits in the chair by her bed while Mum goes out to the park.

‘You’re sixteen, so you’re classed as an adult. We’ve managed to find you a single with ensuite, but there isn’t room for another person to sleep in here.’

Rosie tries to be really mature. She’s not going to get angry, or tell them that Ipswich and UCLH are better because they let her mum stay.

‘The thing is,’ she says, ‘I’ve been really ill. I’ve had a bone marrow transplant, and radiation sickness, and I’ve been told I’m going to die. My mum looks after me and cheers me up. She makes sure I eat and take my medicines, and she helps me in the shower if I need it. She says she’ll sleep in a chair. Please let her stay, because London is so big and I don’t even know where she is if she stays in Brixton. And home is a hundred miles away.’

She doesn’t want to cry but she can feel her nose prickle. It fills with snot and a tear trickles down her cheek.

The woman smiles. ‘I think we can find her a bed. Not everybody gets on so well with their mum, so I have to find out whether you really want her here. It’s easy to get on each other’s nerves in a confined space.’

‘I really want her. We shared a room for a month while I had my transplant.’

When the woman goes, Rosie looks out of the window in case she can see Mum in the park.

Mel checks the mirrors, indicates and pulls out to overtake an old guy in a Ford Ka dawdling along behind a couple of trucks with Netherlands plates. He never

wanted to have children. He's used condoms all his life precisely to ensure he wouldn't have any, taking assiduous care to enact his own private population control measures after the woman who was the love of his life before Jay and Rosa somehow got pregnant in spite of her coil. He kept her company when she had the abortion but she went off with that prat less than a year later and now has two kids and a lover who won't go down on her. He maintains his suspicions that a large percentage of condom failures are attributable to people being too embarrassed to admit they didn't use anything. He never wanted to love Rosa but somehow he's ended up loving her more than anyone. Love doesn't make you happy. Sex is fun, exciting and satisfying but love gets you into situations you'd rather avoid. He's taken the week off to drive Rosa to London every day so she can come home and sleep in her own bed when the injections make her feel sick and achy. She has to have seven days of experimental chemo once a month; she stayed in hospital the first time but says she'd rather poke her own eyes out than do that again. Jay is ghostwriting letters to the pharmaceutical company begging for her to be allowed to have her treatments in Ipswich.

'Mel?'

'Sorry love, what?'

'Can I have my party round your house? I really want to have a party because I didn't do anything for Halloween last year. But Mum could do with a rest.'

He doesn't get it. He's working and driving, but Jay needs a rest? It was Jay's choice to have a child, and to stop working when Rosa got ill. Other women who have sick children choose to keep their jobs and their pensions.

A woman in a BMW with its headlights on is doing eighty, six inches from his back bumper. He indicates and pulls into the inside lane.

'Yeah, course you can. What kind of party?'

'Not big. Like, ten boys and ten girls. Fancy dress. Then we can go trick-or-treating if we want. People can bring beer or wine but no spirits. I'll make the food.'

'I can help,' says Jay from the back.

'What costume you going to wear?'

'Catwoman.'

'Like Michelle Pfeiffer?'

‘Like Halle Berry in Catwoman.’

‘That movie was dire.’

‘Halle Berry is beautiful. And she won an Oscar.’

‘For *Monster’s Ball*. Hang on. I’ve got to concentrate.’

They’ve reached the M25 junction. While Rosa and Jay discuss jellies and black food dye, he keeps an eye out for morons and risk-takers.

The hand-bell chimes again.

‘Gradually bring your focus to your breath. You need not alter or emphasise your breath in any way. Simply become aware as it enters your nostrils, passes through your throat into your lungs, and leaves your body again. In the first stage, we count after each exhalation.’

Breath feels like nothing when it leaves. One. Cool when it floats into Jay’s nose. Sore throat. Fills the alveoli in her lungs like inflatable bunches of grapes. Out again. Two. Body feels dark inside. Bertrand Russell on his deathbed said he wished he’d paid more attention to breath that comes shining from far off. The difference between Buddhist meditation and New Age meditation must be that New Agers breathe out their pain and anger and breathe in the shining light and love of the universe, whereas Buddhists inhale the suffering of the world, transmute it into light and love and exhale it to help others. Lost count. In. Out. One. In out two.

She can hear the calls of market traders from the Cornhill, the beep of a lorry backing up. What would be the best thing in the world would be for Rosie to have her next bone marrow test and they find zero blasts, because of the Essiac herbs, Jay persuaded Rosie to keep drinking the tea because even though it’s disgusting with a kind of mucilaginous texture it’s not bitter like the Chinese herbs. This nurse in Canada in the 1920s got the recipe off some old woman whose cancer was cured by an Ojibwa medicine man, the nurse gave the tea to her own mother after her mother was diagnosed with inoperable cancer of the liver with only days to live, within six weeks her mother was cured and lived to the age of ninety. There will be no blasts at all, Rosie will be completely cured, and the doctors will believe it’s the 5-aza but Jay will know it’s the herbs. Burdock root, sheep’s sorrel, slippery elm and Turkey rhubarb root, Jay looked

them up in her herbal, found out the Latin names and gave them to Dr Akhtar to check for compatibility with Rosie's drugs and chemo. She's had the chemo for three months now, she's been drinking the herbs for six weeks.

The bell chimes again, Jay hasn't counted her breath at all in spite of having sat in meditation every day for the last twenty-seven years, she's completely useless. Her back aches above her right buttock. Mel lounged beside the fire yesterday evening drinking brandy out of a shot-glass Cara Fuck-Face gave him. Transmute it into light and love.

They stack their cushions and amble through to the other room, there's a Green Tara on one of the walls, a female deity with a thousand arms to help and save but no Kuan Yin: mother, star of the sea, healer, walks on water, melts ice.

A woman Jay knows as the partner of one of Mel's Drunken-Duck cronies makes tea. She hasn't recognised Jay. Jay says nothing because she doesn't want to have to tell her about Rosie being ill, she passes mugs and joins a cluster of middle-aged women around the guy who led the mindfulness of breathing.

'Yeah, it was on the M6,' he says. 'I was overtaking a truck. Don't know what happened, its tire blew maybe, must have been doing seventy because I was doing eighty. It veered out of control and knocked me across the central reservation.'

The women gaze at him, lips parted.

'I kept driving. The wrong way down the fast lane into oncoming traffic. I steered through, eventually did a U-turn, drove north to the next slip road and resumed my journey. That's when I first realised I was an avatar.'

Admiring gasps and coos from the group. Yeah, right.

'What's an avatar?' Jay asks.

When someone tells her, she concludes in the privacy of her own mind that if anyone's a manifestation of a deity or great soul in bodily form on earth it has to be Martha, who is beautiful in spirit and body, with endless patience and good humour, a voluptuous figure like a fifties movie star and dark hair cropped into a curled fringe that increases the resemblance, so that Jay wants to take a black-and-white photograph of her with studio lighting and dark lipstick. Or maybe Rosie, who puts up with total crap but manages to have a laugh, who never says a mean word.

She goes straight home because Rosie doesn't have any classes on a Monday afternoon.

'Hey, babes. How was Psychology?'

Rosie's sitting at the kitchen table in front of a plate of crusts from a toasted cheese sandwich, she shouldn't eat so much cheese when she has a bad chest because dairy is mucus forming, Jay hugs her and sniffs her hair.

'Mum.'

'Want to go and photograph the ducks now the sun's out?'

'K. We did how people react to stress. One of the ways was regression, which means you go back to an earlier stage of development. I was all: That's me! Give us a tissue.'

'I'll grab something to eat and then we'll go.'

Jay fetches a packet of tissues from the cupboard. A drip of dark blood runs down Rosie's top lip.

'Hang on sweetie, don't blow. You've got blood.'

'Mirror?'

Rosie peers at her nose in the tiny mirror from her own makeup bag and dabs a couple of folded tissues against the drip, they turn red, Jay passes more tissues. Rosie goes through two small packs, blood drips onto the cork tiles, she leans over the bin. A big clot pokes out of her nostril, it glistens, a black slug.

'It doesn't feel nice.'

'Better not pull it out. I'll get some loo roll.'

'I'm not having a nosebleed to get out of going for a walk. I was looking forward to photographing the ducks.'

Slugs are repulsive. How can her beautiful, good, kind daughter have to endure slugs of her own blood sliming out of her body? Jay almost trips running downstairs with loo roll, a damp flannel and her homeopathy book, phosphorus is indicated for persistent nosebleeds if the blood is bright red, which it isn't, but on the other hand it's good for amenable natures like Rosie's, besides the fact that it stopped her vomiting while she was in UCLH. Jay runs upstairs again for a vial of phosphorus pillules, tips one into Rosie's mouth and wads more loo roll, she rings Martha but there's no answer so she leaves a message and phones the Paediatric Assessment Unit.

'I'll ask Dr Crispin,' says the nurse.

Jay passes Rosie more loo paper and waits.

‘Dr Crispin says lie down with a cold pack at the bridge of your nose. Pinch your nostrils together.’

No ice in the fridge because it’s winter, frozen spinach is too lumpy. Frozen peas. Jay spreads the picnic blanket on the floor for Rosie to lie on and wipes up drops of blood which have splatted into brown circles with splat points round the edges.

‘I don’t like lying down. Blood’s dripping into my throat.’

Rosie sits up, she clutches the defrosting bag of peas against her forehead and the bloody clump of toilet paper under her nose, a drip plops onto her dungarees.

‘Oh no-o-o!’

Is this it? Should Jay be helping Rosie to die in the kitchen surrounded by dirty washing up and bloody toilet paper? She squirts Rescue Remedy into her own mouth and Rosie’s, she pages Martha.

Martha phones back. ‘You’re doing all the right things. How long has it been going on?’

‘Quarter of an hour?’

‘I’ll ring back in ten minutes and see how she is. She might need platelets.’

‘I’m cold, Mum.’

Jay fetches her own brown cardie to wrap round Rosie, she sits on the blanket with her arms round her daughter.

‘You’re doing really well. You’re safe. This is just another adventure. Everybody loves you. It’s now easy for the bleeding to stop. Blessed Kuan Yin, all the Buddhas and all the ancestors in all the worlds, please help Rosie now.’

She repeats reassuring prattle until the situation feels less critical.

‘What do you want to do?’

‘I’d feel better in hospital. They can sort me out.’

Martha rings back. ‘Bring her in to Orford.’

If she were a novice Jay would bundle Rosie straight into the car and drive at top speed. She eats an oatcake and does the washing up. She packs food and drink, a scrapbook and a glue stick, she fetches black trousers for Rosie and

bundles her dungarees into the washing machine with the flannels for a cold rinse.

In Orford Ward they put Rosie in a room with a red duvet cover and pillowcase. Martha runs for platelets, it's unusual to see a nurse running. Dr Crispin gets a cannula in first time.

‘Dr Baldwin’s going to pop down to see you. He’s got some results.’

Jay takes out the scrapbook to distract Rosie from misery.

‘I found that letter from Science Line,’ she says. ‘When you asked why we laugh. I’m going to stick it in.’

‘What’s it say?’

‘They think in animals, laughter is used to distinguish between playful, fun activities and aggressive encounters. Some scientists think people laugh to express dominance or submission, but they believe it has more than one function.’

‘Let me see. You hold it, so I don’t get blood on it.’

Martha puts the platelets up and the bleeding slows down.

Dr Baldwin comes in.

‘I’ve got some good news. First of all, the pharmaceuticals company have agreed that you can have your chemo in Ipswich. So well done writing that letter.’

‘Yay,’ says Rosie. ‘It takes all day going to London. And it makes me sick.’

‘The other thing is, my first impression of your last test suggested flat, post-chemo marrow rather than bone marrow that’s thick with malformed cells. In fact we haven’t been able to identify a single blast.’

Their wish has come true and Rosie is getting better, the doctors will believe it’s the chemo but Jay knows that the Essiac herbs are going to cure her.

Twelve

We're allowed to choose two people to be in the same class when we go up to Rushgrove. I choose Bonita and Tom because they're my best friends. I broke up with Damian.

I'm reading *The Color Purple*. It's a really good book. Even though it's sad it's like real life and it tells you things that are interesting, for instance about your little button. But I think I like boys in that way, not girls.

My mother always tells me not to wear antiperspirant because the aluminium causes cancer. She talks about panty-liners like they're the spawn of the Devil, that will cause evil beings to breed in my knickers. I feel extremely mortified when we're changing for PE and this girl called Phoebe offers to lend me her spray antiperspirant and asks if I shave my legs. I start to spend all my pocket money on panty-liners and razorblades. I cut my legs by mistake the first time I shave them. Something about the blood that rolls down from the cut fascinates me so I have to keep looking.

My mother takes me and Bonita on holiday to Wales. We stay in a flat that smells weird. I wish we were on holiday with Mel because he always rents a posh villa with a swimming pool but Mum always chooses somewhere cheap. My mother is so embarrassing. I wish she would shut up. She keeps reminding Bonita to put on sun lotion. Bonita says she's sweet and she feels safe with her. Bonita washes her own clothes in the bath and Mum says what a nice girl she is. I wish she'd back off.

She takes us on a bus to a deserted cove where we get on this boat and she says, 'Look out for seals.'

The sea is all grey and the wind is cold and smells like fish. When we get to the island, there's nothing there: no shop, no teashop, not even an ice-cream van. Paths disappear through the fog and heather. Mum says she's going to look for puffins and seals. Me and Bonita get as far as the middle of the island. We find a barn and sit in it. It's all crap.

Next day I open my locket and the sun comes out. Bonita and me go to the beach in our bikinis and look at the boys and have a laugh. When we go in the sea the salt water stings the cuts where I've shaved my legs.

How come my mother is so bossy? How come she has the biggest room and all the money, anyway? I take a pound out of her purse and spend it on sweets. She doesn't even notice. When I take a fiver she says she's lost some money and has anybody seen it? I don't even care because I have to spend my pocket money on antiperspirant and razors. I spend the fiver on chocolate. It tastes so sweet and creamy that I can't stop eating. I eat it all and then feel sick. I used to love my mother and I still love her but I don't like her. Hate is the opposite of like, not love.

Rosie's got her hand shading the lens because it's quite bright even though it's snowing. She turns the camera round and points it at her own face. She sees the lens turn as the automatic focus sorts itself out.

'This is me. I don't always look like this. I haven't got dressed today. Oops, I zoomed in by mistake. This round my neck is my locket from Mum and this is my forever necklace. It's a white-gold chain with a white-gold heart and a silver heart that has Forever engraved on it. Me, Feebs, Megs, Barbie and Amma all have them, to remind us we're best friends forever.'

Gold lasts forever and it doesn't tarnish but stays bright and shiny like their friendship. Feebs, Megs and Barbie got them engraved in time for Christmas. They clubbed together to pay for Rosie's and they're going to get one for her mum.

'This is my book, on my mum's bed. I'm reading The Dare Game by Jacqueline Wilson. It's another Tracey Beaker book. That's Tracey, that's the football guy and that's her nerdy friend.'

It's a children's book, because apart from school work she likes reading children's books and watching Disney videos and half the time she can't even be bothered to go out with her mates because she gets too tired and it's all too much effort. Everyone is going out tonight but Rosie isn't going because she feels sick and headachey. She liked Joe but he liked Feebs, and then she liked Aaron but he stopped flirting with her after he heard she's going to die. Her mum thought she was cured and Dr Baldwin said her counts looked good but it turns out that was a mistake. It's not like the movies, unless maybe it will be like Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants and she will be all pale and die in hospital.

She opens the window and aims the camera outside. There is nothing but snow, snow falling and blowing, not thick snow but flakes that drift in different directions, onto the brick-coloured pots and the blue pots with nothing but dead things in them.

‘Mum’s probably going to wonder what I’m doing because I’ve got her window wide open, so her room’s going to be freezing. But you won’t mind, will you?’

Shaky hand, it wobbles around all over the place when Rosie zooms in.

‘I bought her the blue flower pots, like that one, look, keep still, for Christmas when I was little and I was really proud because I paid for them with my own money.’

It’s eleven twenty-seven on the twenty-fourth of the twelfth oh-five. Christmas Eve. Rain has melted the snow and Rosie doesn’t want to video this because it’s too crap. She doesn’t want to go to sleep because when she wakes up it will be Christmas. She feels so scared. Like she’s falling and there is absolutely nothing to hold onto.

She’s lying in bed at Mel’s house with her Chinese crimson walls that Mel helped her paint and her hammock that he finally put up after about ten years, and she doesn’t want to go to sleep. She doesn’t want to die. It feels terrifying. What is she terrified of? She’ll have to go through a door in the dark without knowing what lurks behind it. The worst thing would be a spider as big as a house, with hairy legs, but that isn’t actually very likely. Even though it’s pointless to be scared and pointless to wonder what will happen, she can’t make herself feel better because her entire life is so crap.

Mum is mean. Not often, because usually she’s loving and kind, but sometimes, like once a day, she snaps or gets annoyed and Rosie feels like she shouldn’t be here. Like she shouldn’t exist. All Mum has to say is, Can’t you get it yourself for once? and Rosie feels hurt and upset and keeps crying. She doesn’t feel Christmassy. Christmas always used to be her favourite day of the year. When she woke up her stocking would be on the end of her bed and she’d creep in and wake Mum without waking Mel so she could come and watch Rosie open it. Her stocking presents always used to be things like joke dog poo and a magic trick and some chocolate coins and those lasting bubbles where you put a squidge of plastic on the end of the tube and blow and make a do-it-yourself balloon, and a pen and a Satsuma, and she was allowed to eat chocolate before breakfast. She and Mum would play and after Mel woke up she’d have a bit of breakfast, like Coco Pops or something, and then they open presents round the

tree. Rosie always gets more presents than anybody else. Then they have lunch: Rosie always has a cheese toastie and Mum and Mel have smoked salmon and scrambled eggs, yuck, and then Mum usually drags Rosie out for a bike ride while Mel cooks the dinner. He cooks a duck for Christmas dinner and a chicken to eat cold next day, or if Betty and Derek are staying, or Siouxsie and her girlfriend are coming, he serves the chicken as well. They always play board games and games like charades or moods.

But it doesn't seem like her best day any more.

She doesn't want to have to be happy tomorrow. She wants to curl up in the corner of her bed with the cushions and her teddies, and go to sleep and never wake up, ever. It's been another shit year.

She's lying there with one hand round her locket and the other holding her blankie and she cries without making any noise because she was ill when she was a little kid. Then she got better. She got ill when she was at school and then she started the injections and she was normal. Then they took it all away. She doesn't want to be brave any more. She wants it over. It hurts so much she can't stand it.

Jay opens the yellow curtains onto the dark garden. A miniature deer, with pointed horns rather than antlers, steps out from between the trees next to the washing pole. It sniffs at the grass where flakes of snow are settling and then lifts its head and glances towards the house. As Jay watches, it fades out of sight between the bushes. She stands still, she almost holds her breath while it appears and disappears twice more, each time it looks in her direction. It's been in the garden every morning this week, in the half-light between dawn and day, the half sense between sleeping and waking, it might be a spirit guide.

They have to take Rosie to hospital on New Year's Eve for platelets because the doctors have said her blood counts are looking grim again. Jay is beyond disappointed that the Essiac herbs haven't cured her, she keeps trying to ask Dr Crispin whether it's the chemo or the leukaemia that's fucked Rosie's counts, she wants to know whether Rosie's cold could be dangerous with her white counts so low but he refuses to answer questions, maybe he doesn't want to admit that he doesn't know. There are so many things even the doctors don't

know, they never got Rosie's chimerism report back and nobody seems to have a clue what happened to it.

Rosa goes to bed after tea. She wanted to spend New Year's Eve with friends but Phoebe has a cold, Megs is away and anyway she feels knackered after her transfusion. He pours Jay another glass of cava.

'Let's start the new year with a bang. Anyway, I think you could do with a good seeing to.'

They shower together for the first time in months. He bends to tease her nipples, suck them into his mouth and slowly release them. She soaps his penis and balls, pushes his foreskin back and cleans round his glans. When you've been with the same person for seventeen years, any sexual encounter somehow gets converted to shorthand. Except after Cara, after they got back together, when Jay surprised him by wearing high heels and suspender belts and experimenting with new hand and mouth techniques. He wondered whether she'd learned them from another lover but she said she got them out of a book. He feels his penis begin to swell. Anticipation shortens his breath.

She steps out, grabs a towel and wraps him as if he were a five year old. 'Come to bed.'

They dry themselves. He lights a candle in his bedroom. In bed she squirms against him, kisses him on the lips and strokes kisses down his arms and legs. She trails her hair over his chest and belly, which irritates him because the ends are damp.

'Your hair's all wet.'

She raises her head. 'All wet? Is it dripping on you?'

She kneels up, licks her palm and each of her fingers and slides a couple of fingers inside herself. She holds them under his nose so that he can sniff. She licks them again. He wants her hot mouth on his penis. And then inside her, warm cherry pie not apple pie, with slippery rounded soft lumps like stoned cherries. He wants her mouth on him now. Even though he enjoys the view of her buttocks as she squats with her back to him and squeezes up and down until he feels he's going to explode, all he wants is for her to lick him and suck him. So that when she rolls him on top of her, he wants to fuck her in the mouth but

she's lifting her hips and thrusting against him. Her back is arched and her bum lifts right off the bed so that it almost feels threatening, but it's exciting as he thrusts deep inside her and he comes and collapses.

He lifts his weight on his elbows so he won't squash her.

'Oh that was so good. But I wanted you to come. Why didn't you come?'

'I want to talk to you but I'm...I blurt stuff out.'

'You can always talk to me, love.'

He shifts to lie beside her with his head on the pillow. The ceiling plaster's combed into a mad fan pattern where the edges of the fans fail to overlap. Looking at it could drive you insane.

'What's up?' He sits up, switches on the bedside lamp and starts to roll a cigarette.

'Can I have a roll-up?'

'You've given up.' He bats her hand away when she reaches for his tobacco tin.

'Can't you talk to me?'

'I always enjoy talking to you, darlin.'

'Tell me something. What do you get angry with me about? What do you love about me?'

He heats a lump of dope with his lighter and crumbles it into his roll-up. 'I love having sex with you. I can't believe that after all these years I still lust for you. I want to bury my head in your fanny and kiss you till you melt into a puddle of sexual ecstasy and dribble off the bed.' As he inhales, everything shrinks into this particular moment. The roaring of waves in a high wind fills his ears. He can picture the waves racing in, white horses dimly visible in the black night. Of course it's not the sea. Must be traffic on the West End Road.

'What do you get pissed off about?' She's wearing makeup and her eyes look huge.

He can feel himself groaning out a sigh. 'Not pissed off, but I sometimes wish you'd spend a bit more time with me... make an effort to do something for yourself. Work on your photographs...try and get them published. I know Rosa's really ill, but she's a separate person from you.'

'Rosie needs me. Remember Brian at UCLH? He was nineteen but he asked his mum to stay with him after he saw me staying with Rosie.'

‘Some women who have sick children keep their jobs and their pensions. You’ve got choices. I’m not just being selfish. It’s for you. You need to have your own life.’

‘I can’t believe what a wanker you are.’

He feels as if she’s slapped his face.

She hasn’t finished. ‘I can’t believe you said you couldn’t afford to go to Spain with me and Rosie but now you’ve booked to go to the Caribbean with Siouxsie and you didn’t even ask Rosie if she wanted to go.’

She doesn’t shout, presumably to avoid waking Rosa, but she’s hissing at him. It’s obvious she doesn’t care how much devastation she inflicts. Her fury speeds out of the blue in a huge, destructive wave that knocks him on his back. He can’t breathe. He’s always believed she loved him. She called him a wanker. She’s always been the positive one, encouraging him to express himself. She’s always understood and cared, even when he behaved like an egotistic prat. In return he’s shown her how much he loves her; he couldn’t split up with her in the end even though she takes him for granted. She’s crying and hissing. Emotional blackmail. If she weren’t such a drama queen, Rosa might not be so ill. She says she can’t trust him, even though he hasn’t got involved with another woman since Cara. Even though he hasn’t intentionally met up with Cara since Rosa’s had leukaemia.

She’s started to cry. ‘I really need some commitment from you.’

‘You know I’m there for you.’ His wrist itches. He makes an effort not to scratch it.

She rests her head on his shoulder. Her hair has dried curly and soft.

‘Want some juice? Orange or grapefruit?’ He makes a movement to get out of bed.

‘I get really anxious because of my dad dying and my mum lying and saying he’d gone away.’

On the wall, William Hurt cradles Kathleen Turner in his arms in the poster for Body Heat. He can’t read the tagline in the flickering light from the candle but he knows what it says. All the shit he went through as a kid. All the times boys at school called him Ginger or Curly Girly or those other hates. Copper-knob, Ginger-nut. Forced him to take the role of Wendy when they played Peter Pan. Never even a Lost Boy or a Redskin. Why he always played

with Siouxsie rather than the lads. Then round about thirteen the other boys started growing their hair long because it was trendy. All those years he dyed his own hair black. He doesn't go round moaning and wailing about how hard life is. That time when they were fourteen, sleeping over at Terry's. The four of them masturbated over a picture in Penthouse. Not looking at each other. But he could see that their erections pointed towards their navels while his penis aimed at the floor. Later they got pissed on Double Diamond and Rick called him Girly-knob. His own mate. He believed he was the only guy who didn't get proper erections. Spent the next ten years worrying about it. This is the first time they've had sex since the hotel. She's not interested any more. If she never. If she shuts down pleasure. He'll be trapped. Dry and cold. Trapped together.

He sits on the edge of the bed. Candlelight reflects off the crimson curtains and terracotta walls. Jay says pink but it's terracotta. He wants a cigarette. For fuck's sake. Get over it. Cara's red lipstick. The shadows under her eyes.

'Oh grow up, Jay,' he says. 'Get over it.'

He pulls on jogging bottoms and a jumper. He needs to think. He stumbles out of the house and starts walking. The street is empty even though it must be midnight; he can hear ships' foghorns moo from the docks. The night lurches around him. Fireworks crackle and explode against the distant black. He can't remember where he parked the Citroën. His calves hurt. He feels in his pocket for his keys. It's too cold. His ears hurt. He'll drive somewhere. He's not drunk. Jay's cruelty has knocked the lovely drunken, stoned buzz out of him. Rosa's prognosis is bad enough without her giving him a hard time. He thought she loved him. She was spitting out everything he's ever done wrong. He knows he's flawed but he believed she loved him. When he lied it was only because he didn't want to hurt her.

Where's the car? His stomach hurts. His face is wet. The wind freezes his cheeks. He's sobbing. He doesn't care if anyone sees him. He fumbles his handkerchief out of his pocket. The first time in years he's needed it himself. Usually Rosa or Jay.

His mouth fills with saliva. His stomach hurts. He leans forward between two parked cars and throws up in the gutter. He thought she loved him. Seventeen years. His heart and lungs have been ripped out and replaced with an

aching gap. Nobody's perfect but. He hasn't felt this lonely since before Jay. On his own for two years. A reject. Don't go there. Shrinks his heart small and dry.

Here's the car. He starts the engine and belts himself in. Something not right. Switch the lights on. Whoops. He's too drunk to drive. He'll sit in the car for a bit. Put the radio on

Thirteen

I am so damn unpretty. I haven't even started my periods yet, but Bonita, Megs, Feebs and Barbie have all started. I hate my mother. I bought some new jeans from Miss Selfridge, which were quite expensive and cool and I loved them, and then my mother went and got some exactly the same except two sizes bigger. I'd feel pissed off if any of my friends got some exactly the same but my mother... I can't believe it. This is how I feel: FUCK OFF YOU COW. AAAAAAAH! FUCK BOLLOCKS. I want to strike her down with lightning. I want to erupt and bury her in boiling lava.

I have to give myself injections every day and it hurts and makes the skin on my thighs go hard and lumpy. Not only do I have dark skin compared with my friends but my hair won't grow. I get it permed and spray it with leave-in conditioner but then they say, Your curls feel sticky. I scrape it back in a ponytail. Even though I haven't got my period, hair keeps growing in my armpits and on my legs until it feels like a horror movie where your body gets taken over by an alien life form.

When I'm shaving my legs in the bath I get a new razorblade and slice it along the inside of my arm. The first slice looks red but doesn't open my skin. I want to see what's inside me so I press a bit harder. The second cut looks red straight away and it stings and blobs of blood seep out. I wonder what it would be like to kill myself but I don't want to kill myself. Except if I die they'll all be sorry and everybody will go to my funeral and stand there dressed in black and cry, and it will hurt them as much as it hurts me now. The razorblade hurts but not as much as the pain inside me. It feels satisfying to see the blood ooze along the cut and well up and run down into the water. I get commendation certificates at school but nobody sees the real me. I have an invisibility cloak but I don't want to be invisible. Everybody is allowed to hurt me but they don't see how much they hurt me.

I hide the cuts on my arms by wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt under my school shirt. When I get changed for PE, Megs asks what happened and I don't know what to say. I tell her I cut myself and she asks why. I say I don't know. Megs and Feebs sit down with me at lunchtime in the playground and it's a cold day so we're on our own and they say they're worried about me. I feel angry that Megs has told Feebs. They say they're my friends and they want me to be myself but not hurt myself. They ask what's wrong. I blurt out that I'm fat and ugly and I binge on chocolate and then I hate myself worse. I cry and they put their arms around me. They tell me I'm beautiful and funny and smart and that everybody hates themselves sometimes. They say they are my friends and I should tell an adult and they'll try and help me not to eat too much chocolate and not to hurt myself.

When I'm washing up with my sleeves rolled up, my mother sees the cuts. Her face goes all serious with her mouth in a line like she's angry. She makes me hurt myself with injections but now she's going to get stressy because I've cut myself. She makes me go and sit on her lap on the sofa, even though I'm not nine years old.

'You need to love yourself. It's not always easy. You have to work at it. Even if everybody in the world hurts you. Even if I hurt you, you need to be kind to yourself.'

Another day she makes me sit on her lap and says she's arranging for me to go to counselling and I tell her I don't want to go. She says if I won't see the counsellor she'll take me to the doctor. She drops me off once a week after school. The counsellor says she won't tell my parents anything I say. She won't tell anybody unless I hurt somebody else badly or plan to hurt myself badly, like suicide. I end up talking to her about blood, bone marrow and chocolate. I tell her about the time my mother sent me to bed without any supper and I tell her Isaac never comes to see me because there must be something wrong with me and I tell her how I nearly died when I was two, and all the times I had to stay in hospital when my friends never came to see me.

Rosie is in Aaron's actual bedroom. Not on her own with him, worse luck. Feebs, Megs, Kieron and her came back for lunch because none of them have classes on Monday afternoon.

A boy's room is different from a girl's room: less co-ordinated, or at least Aaron's is, although not Tom's because his mum is an interior designer. This room is bigger than Rosie's bedroom because Aaron lives in one of the posh huge houses down Christchurch Street.

She's sitting on the bed with Feebs. Aaron's duvet cover has a brown squidgy pattern which makes her glad to be a girl so she doesn't have to choose brown things. Mind you, he does have a weirdly long pink paper lantern hanging from a hook in the ceiling. Megs and Kieron are on the floor leaning against the wall and Aaron is sitting on his swivel chair singing along to some rock song by a band called Jimmy Eat World that has quite good lyrics about being yourself and not worrying whether it's good enough for anybody else. She'll look them up and maybe download a couple of tracks from iTunes. He's playing air guitar alongside the guitar solo and she wonders why he doesn't play a real guitar because there are two leaning against the wall, tucked behind the chest of drawers. She wishes she had her handycam so she could get some footage of Aaron and then when she's alone she could drool over it and investigate whether he actually is as gorgeous as he always seems in the flesh. His hair is quite long now, not like Kieron's that is shaved at the back, and it looks shiny and clean.

She would film the signs on his wall that are quirky and interesting. She can't tell whether they're real signs because some of them look real but others seem unlikely. A red metal square with a white arrow pointing to the right that says PEDESTRIANS is obviously real, but what about the triangular one with a massive finger print and STAY OUT!/? Or the one that shows a lightning squiggle knocking down an outline man, which says DANGER OF DEATH KEEP OFF? She likes the small one that says I'M AGAINST RACISM...something that's too small to read and then GLC. Glick? It's good

when people let you know they're against racism. When she used to go to Saturday School they had all those signs that said, No Racism, No Bullying, which made it really clear.

A lot of Aaron's signs are to do with keeping your distance which makes her wonder whether he's the kind of guy who doesn't like getting close to girls or maybe it's something to do with the nature of signs. He's stopped playing air guitar and is texting a lot. Maybe he's texting a girlfriend.

She could get her camera out that she has in her bag for her photography project but actually pointing and clicking would seem a bit explicit, plus she would probably need a flash in here because it's a really dark day.

'What you doing for your project?' she asks Feebs.

'Detumescence. No, it's actually People and Their Pets.'

Feebs flicks her eyes in Megs' direction and Rosie understands she doesn't want to say it too loud because Megs' hamster died yesterday and Megs is really upset. When she rolls her eyes, Rosie knows what she means because neither of them can believe that Megs has got back together with Kieron even though he treats her like shit.

'We should give it a Christian burial this arvo,' Rosie goes, except it comes out as bue-rial and she laughs and corrects herself.

Feebs laughs nervously. Rosie has noticed that all her friends avoid any topic that comes within a hundred miles of death unless they forget, on which occasions they suddenly get embarrassed and change the subject. This time she changes the subject herself.

'People and their pets could be entertaining. D'you remember that cartoon version of 101 Dalmatians where the dogs look like their owners?'

'Yeah, that's excellent. Maybe I could get the person to dress up as the kind of animal their pet is. How 'bout you?'

'Not sure.'

Rosie doesn't want to say anything else, because her mates only see one side of her. But she'll be seventeen this year and she's trying to integrate the different parts of her life. She feels nervous but Feebs is one of her best friends so if she can't say it to her, then who?

‘Maybe hospitals. Or maybe the African-Caribbean community in Ipswich. Mum’s friend is doing interviews for this Caribbean Experience project and I went along with her to take some photos.’

The woman who was doing the video interviewed this amazing woman whose name is Mrs Stander but she said, Call me Gwen. She had white hair tied up in a black headscarf with a pink-and-green pattern and she wore big glasses. The way she talked made Rosie think of her other dad, Isaac, even though he comes from Jamaica and Gwen came from Grenada, which was the first thing she said. My mother raised us, she said. We never hungry, we never beg, we never wants nothing, we always have plenty. The way Gwen spoke was slow and dignified. She emphasised words like plen-ty with an up and down movement of her right hand. She said, My mother was a strong, healthy, working, spiritual woman. She didn’t ’fraid of nobody, no care who you be, how big you be; she had wisdom and she used the wisdom; she wasn’t fully educated, but you could not fool her.

Gwen said, I come to meet the worst situation in England. What I meet I didn’t expect it, right, because my husband especially come from a good home and he was a well-educated person. England sounded like Ing-glan. In Ipswich Gwen’s husband had to work at the animal-feed factory and the family, with two children, had to live in one room in a house where the toilet was yellow. Me think me still smell the house up to now, Gwen said. Rosie felt embarrassed for England because she’s English, not Caribbean, which made her feel really relieved when Gwen said they got offered a house in Whitehouse and they couldn’t have had better neighbours and their neighbours were white. Obviously Rosie knows she isn’t white but she does feel English and most of her friends are white. In fact, why isn’t she white? Why do people have to be black or white, and if they’re mixed then why can’t they choose which they want to be?

She can’t tell Feebs any of this. Does everybody have parts of their life they find it impossible to talk about to their mates? Not because it’s difficult to find the words but because it seems so separate from the normal world of A-levels, Saturday jobs, boyfriends, families, shopping and going out.

‘I expect I’ll choose hospital, because we’re always going there anyway,’ she says.

‘Diane Arbus style or something a bit more detumescent like Martin Parr?’

‘I think black and white like Diane Arbus but a bit kinder, somehow. Maybe not such wide angles. I want to take pictures of some of the children who have cancer but I definitely don’t want to make them look like freaks.’

‘Your chains are muddled. Lean forward.’

Rosie runs her thumb and finger along the chains of her locket and her forever heart, which have got twisted together, and then leans forward so Feebs can untangle them.

Aaron has stopped texting. He picks up a book, stretches across and says, ‘I’ve just finished reading this excellent book. It’s funny and you can borrow it if you want.’

Rosie isn’t sure whether he’s holding it out to Feebs or to her but his gorgeous eyes are looking right into hers and he’s smiling so she takes the book, *Stupid White Men* by Michael Moore and she knows Mel has got this book but she doesn’t mention that.

‘Thanks.’

‘Tom says he’s on his way,’ says Aaron. ‘He told them he’s got to go to the dentist.’

He must have been texting Tom, not a girlfriend. Tom is so stupid. He’s already had one warning at work and he’s going to lose his job if he doesn’t take it seriously. Rosie’s about to say something except the music changes to a track she recognises.

‘This is one of my favourites,’ she says.

‘Yeah? Me too.’

She thought she partly liked it as a girly thing because after the bit where Missy Elliott says about an unknown virus attacking all clubs it goes into a rhythm that’s like one of those clapping games girls practise in the playground at primary school. It’s called *Pass That Dutch* and the words are funny but also the sound is witty, like when the noise of a car alarm comes before she sings car alarm, and the applause, and when she says about having five seconds to catch your breath and an old-fashioned alarm clock rings. And the horse neighing. Kieron always sings along if it’s Eminem but he doesn’t to this.

Aaron goes to answer the doorbell and comes back with Tom, who says, 'Great song if you're stoned. Let's fire one up.'

Then he trips over Kieron's feet and attacks Kieron. Megs slides out of the way while they wrestle.

Rosie's like, 'Got to go now.'

'Ro-Ro, at least try it,' Tom says from the floor.

'Why would I want to take drugs? I've had more drugs than anybody at the whole of Rushgrove. I turned down morphine because I don't want to be an addict. They gave me ketamine at Great Ormond Street, as an anaesthetic, when I was a kid. It's supposed to be some kind of designer drug but it's actually a horse tranquilliser.'

It gave her frightening dreams about her mum being a wicked witch. Plus she does in fact want to start work on her photography project. She made Dr Crispin give her a huge syringe with a needle and if she can get enough light she's going to take photographs of it next to her hand so people can see how massive it is. None of her friends understand what treatment is like, so if she does her project on hospitals maybe they'll see some of what she has to deal with. Her master plan is to do really well at school, live as normal a life as possible and be a good person and then she won't die. So far it's all going according to plan. She's even started driving lessons because you can start before you're seventeen if you're disabled. Last August they said she had a couple of months but she's made it into another year.

She hugs Tom when he stands up and dusts himself down. She kisses Megs and says, 'Later, Runticle. Bye, Kieron.'

Aaron comes to the door with her and Feebs. It's raining and cold. He kisses them and tucks the book in Rosie's bag.

'Peace out, Rose-ski, peace out Feebski.'

'Brolly, tra la!' Feebs clicks open a pink umbrella.

Rosie goes to tuck her arm through Feebs'. She's laughing and looking back at Aaron so she doesn't notice the bike lying on the walk. She trips over it. Her shinbone hurts and she's lying half on the bike and half on the ground, really mortified. She tries to laugh.

Feebs goes, 'Oh my god,' drops her umbrella and starts to pull Rosie up. Aaron comes to help.

The rusty bike pedal has torn her tights just above her ankle. It's cut through her skin. She's bleeding but she doesn't feel too worried because she had platelets on Thursday and surely her counts can't have dropped that quickly? She goes back inside to wash her leg under the cold tap and dry it with paper towels. Aaron can't find a bandage so she rings her mum to come and pick her up.

'Anyone want to come round mine for a cosmopolitan? I need a cocktail for the shock.'

Feebs and Megs say they'll go back with her. Not Aaron. The sight of her leg with shreds of black nylon embedded in a gory mess would be enough to put any boy off.

'I think of it as a health drink,' she says. 'My mum gets cranberry juice sweetened with apple juice and then you add lemon or lime, plus cointreau that's made of oranges, so besides a spot of citron vodka it's basically fruit.'

Feebs goes home after one cosmopolitan but Rosie and Megs drink what's left in the blender.

Megs suddenly blurts out, 'After my dad died, I went to the spiritualist church with my mum, and he spoke to us, through the median.'

'The medium?' Rosie asks.

'Well, the woman who gets messages from spirits.'

'What did he say? How did you know it was him?'

They're sitting on cushions, leaning against the sofa, and Rosie snuggles closer so Megs will know it's safe to talk. She smells like perfume. Rosie has to keep her leg out straight until Martha calls in to clean her wound and dress it properly.

'Well, the woman said she was getting the word bunny, and I nudged my mum because my dad used to call me Bunny Rabbit. I was only about eight. So my mum put her hand up and told the woman.'

'Oh my god.'

'She looked at me and said, Your dad wants you to know that he's well and happy, and he is very proud of you.'

'That's amazing.'

'So, you know, after...'

'I could get a message to you?'

‘I’ll get my mum to go to the church with me, and you can say...’

‘I’ll get the woman to say, Pass that Dutch. If she says it, you’ll know for certain there’s life after death.’

‘OK.’

‘But Megs, remember to pay attention in case she garbles it and says something about Holland or Amsterdam, or the Netherlands.’

This is bliss. This is Mel’s life. Warm and wet, blue and silver. His body consists of sixty per cent water, with the result that immersion in the element which hatched all life forms imbues him with an atavistic ecstasy. Oceans cover more than seventy per cent of the earth’s surface. There are one hundred and thirty-nine point five million square miles of water to explore, and that’s only in two dimensions. It’s like being an astronaut because Mel has travelled to a new world and also because he’s free to move through dimensions: as well as left or right, forwards or backwards, he can swim upwards and downwards. Maybe he could slip back through time to be twenty-five again.

He grins at his buddy and kicks against the blue to swivel upside down. With hardly any gravity the blood doesn’t rush to his face and ears; hanging upside down makes no difference except that he becomes more aware of the lines of platinum baubles, one on each side, streaming up past his legs. The constant sound of the bubbles emerging from his demand valve overpowers any other strange noises there might be: eerie clicks and whistles, fishy songs. He turns right way up and adjusts his buoyancy until he can fold his legs as Jay does for meditation and sit rising and falling with his breath. Each inhalation from his tank lifts him like one of those mad yogis who practise levitation. Each exhalation allows him to sink back to his former place, if it were possible to pinpoint any particular location in what is essentially boundless. Submergence in the boundless stretches him until he becomes as deep as the ocean. He’s thinking profound thoughts as if he were stoned, or as a man might who has dived too deep and experienced nitrogen narcosis. He checks the computer on his wrist. Only twelve metres down. Nothing but the fabulousness of it all going to his head. Twenty-seven degrees Celsius. Warm and wonderful.

Their dive leader, Ginette, hovers nearby for a moment. She signs towards the reef. Mel and his dive buddy, whose name he's already forgotten, echo the gesture and follow her into the current. He doesn't need to know the guy's name because he can identify him by his bald head like a penis and the yellow sheath near his ankle. The current operates like a conveyor belt; it floats them slowly along one side of the reef. The corals are amazing. Out of this world. Coral like green fingers, coral like orange fungus growing out of a dead tree, coral like a cluster of tiny brown volcanoes, like bouquets of blue and mauve flowers. Gorgonians, which he hasn't seen before: species of soft coral that flourish into pink and orange fans and branches. He crosses his legs again and relaxes on the moving settee. A silver shoal shivers above him before vanishing. He recognises a trumpet fish, an angelfish and a clownfish with snazzy yellow stripes on black. His buddy points to a fish that has spots and a stumpy tail, with an eye that appears to be more on its body than its head, and then performs an elaborate shrug. Mel peers at the laminated card hung from a lanyard round his neck. He can't see the spotty fish but it doesn't matter.

When he stands up on his settee and pees into his wet suit, his piss feels barely warmer than the sea.

A turtle swoops past. Mel wants to develop gills and fly through the ocean without a pension fund, life insurance or hospitals. Human beings are so weird: other creatures simply eat, shit, snuggle, play. Struggle for dominance, mate, raise families and die. Human beings impose bizarre beliefs and structures in an attempt to control the chaos.

A movement catches his attention. His buddy is gesturing with the palm-down flat-hand rocking from side to side that indicates, I'm not quite right, followed by the vertical palm, thumb towards body that means, Shark. Mel has to look round for quite a while before he catches sight of a reef shark heading away. What a wuss. The guy should know that he has about as much chance of being attacked by a shark as he does of winning the lottery. He's more likely to get struck by lightning. The shark performs a graceful U-turn and swims towards them. Mel faces it calmly. It won't attack unless it senses fear or blood, or unless he were to stretch his fingers towards it and wriggle them like worms. It will be repelled by the bubbles from his air tank. He can see the outlines of other sharks

in the distance. If they all came to investigate, he'd be worried. As it is he circles his thumb and index finger in the OK sign.

Time underwater streams slowly, filled with wonders. He's gazing at a weirdly cute scabby orange seahorse when Ginette kicks across and signs them up. He returns her thumb up but Baldy Wuss rocks his hand and indicates down. Ginette signs up again and points to her pressure gauge. They need to reach the surface with fifty bar in case of emergencies. What a tosser. The guy wouldn't argue with his dive leader if she were a man. Mel points to his own pressure gauge and signs Up, Up, insistently. Penis Head shrugs and signs OK. They all flipper up to nine metres, letting air out of their stab jackets, and hang around for three minutes. Three more minutes at six metres. The surface above them stretches like a silver mirror formed from the shiniest material in the world.

Breaking the mirror, he spits out his mouthpiece and pushes his mask onto his forehead. The world above is almost as magical as the world below. The pointed volcanic peaks of the Pitons surge above the green forest. The other divers are breaking the surface as the boat's dinghy speeds towards them. They chatter excited Wows and Did you sees?

Siouxie has spent the day in the spa and next to the pool. She doesn't like sand. They relax on the balcony of their cabin and drink mojitos delivered by some guy in a white shirt. Mel smokes tailor-mades, to live up to the ambience.

'I had an amazing back and leg massage with Ayurvedic oils chosen to complement my energies! Then a facial and foot reflexology.'

'You sound like a brochure. Going, going, gone.'

Weird how in the tropics the sun slides down behind the horizon. Its descent plunges them into darkness accompanied by a sudden change in birdcalls. Siouxie uses his lighter to light the candle lantern on the table.

'I saw a humming-bird! And I met this guy: Mindoo. He says we should go to the street party in Gros Islet tomorrow and eat barbecue. Everybody goes, they play dance music and it's a real experience. His friend will drive us.'

'You scarlet woman!'

He can't resist teasing her. Her last live-in girlfriend turned out to be a complete disaster in such a creepy way that it would do her good to enjoy a holiday romance.

‘He’s just a friend. I think some of the guys here like to make friends and get taken out by Europeans or Americans on holiday. So if he can show us the good places, why not?’

‘You look about twenty-five.’

She smiles. ‘You know what? When my cheeks start to sag I get a non-surgical facelift.’

‘Which is?’

‘They stimulate the muscles with a weak electrical current.’

Why would anybody want to have any kind of electric shock? They’ll both be fifty this year. He’s known her since he was four, practically all his life. Siouxsie always sees the glass as half full of mojito in spite of disastrous relationships, heart trouble and stress. He’s never known her to lie around crying all day, as Jay does occasionally. The thought of Jay, rather than giving him a warm feeling in his belly and groin, makes him uncomfortable because things have become so twisted between them. When he’s masturbated during his siesta the last couple of days, he’s imagined Cara rather than Jay: Cara who flirts with him rather than Jay who wants more than he can give. Cara who’s open about her depression and mental illness rather than Jay who pretends to be normal, so that when she gets in a state he can’t help wondering whether it might be his fault. Cara who emailed jpegs of her pubes rather than Jay who’s always done her meditation but is now becoming bizarrely religious and talking about the Buddha. Cara who has a life rather than Jay who thinks of nothing and nobody except Rosa. Even the thought of Rosa, brave, flaky and loveable as she is, trails feelings of sorrow and inadequacy which he could do without.

‘Four more days. I don’t want to go home, but I feel guilty about not wanting to go.’

‘It’s hardly surprising, Mel. It’s tough for all of you. It’s the worst thing that could happen to any parent.’

‘Jay and I are having a terrible time. One minute she loves me and wants us to make a commitment to each other but the next she seems to hate me and push me away.’

‘I know she loves you. She must feel desperately confused and miserable, with what Rosa’s going through. You’ve both been wonderful parents. Rosa’s such a lovely, loving, intelligent girl.’

He's on holiday. He doesn't have to deal with it.

'Nearly as gorgeous as you.' He raises his glass and clinks it against Siouxsie's. 'Cheers. Hope you've slathered on insect repellent to repulse the woman-eating mozzies. When I came here before, with Club Med, each room had a light above the door and when you walked home at night you could see a ball of grey smoke round each light, sort of fuzzy like a dandelion clock.'

Siouxsie laughs. 'How bizarre.'

'It was a ball of mozzies, about the size of a football, so you had to hold your breath, duck, rush into your room and slam the door.'

'How come we don't get mosquitoes round our jacuzzi here?'

'I hate to think. I told you about the Medistas or whatever they were called, who used to drag us off our sun beds twice a day to sing the Club Med song? Oh monsieur, c'mon, ça sera fun. And that woman with the fake tits? She was only about eighteen and when she lay down they stuck up like pudding bowls. I don't know how anyone could find that attractive.'

Pain pounds in Jay's head so that she can't escape from it by focusing on some other part of her body. When she finally managed to get to sleep last night she dreamed she was on an iceberg, a swirling white current swept her away from her mother and sister, even though she cried and begged them not to leave no words came out of her mouth.

Today she's supposed to bundle their duvets into bin-liners and drive to Cambridge with Rosie to meet Zelda and Amma, they'll stay overnight at Zelda's friend's place and then bring Zelda and Amma to Ipswich tomorrow. What with her hospital trips Rosie ought not to take two days off school, she has exams looming at the end of term, except what the fuck do exams matter if she's going to die?

The dentist's receptionist can fit Jay in with an emergency appointment but not till tomorrow. Walking downstairs has made her blood pump faster so that the pain digs into her head, she wants to stay still and hide from it but she has to take Rosie her warm apple juice and morning drugs.

‘First of all, I’ve had toothache for a week and I want to appreciate you for being so good-natured and marvellous in spite of what you’re going through. You’re an angel and I love and admire you more than words can say.’

‘Mum.’

‘Second of all, I don’t think we should go to Cambridge today. I’m off my head with toothache and painkillers and also it’s started to snow.’

Rosie turns on her phone and starts texting.

‘You should go to school for Photography and Psychology and come home after lunch.’

‘My stomach hurts and my leg hurts. I don’t want to go anywhere. I don’t even want to get out of bed.’

Jay fetches toast and marmite. In the kitchen she remembers the deer and looks out of the window, hoping for a sign from the universe. After the toast she carries a tray upstairs with a bowl of warm water, a bottle of disinfectant, antiseptic wipes, cotton-wool balls, a tube of antiseptic healing cream, sterile dressings and a fresh bandage.

‘Listen sweetie, do you think you’d feel better if we did go?’

Rosie looks up from peeling away yesterday’s gauze from the wound in her leg.

‘I wasn’t sulking because you don’t want to go. I do feel better, maybe because I took that lansoprazole.’

‘I know you weren’t sulking but people have complicated feelings. Women especially sometimes turn anger in on ourselves until our stomachs hurt. You depend on me a lot, so you might not want to disagree with me, but also you’ve really been looking forward to seeing Amma and Zelda and going out for a meal in Cambridge. So you could be feeling angry and frustrated.’

‘This cotton wool and antiseptic is better than the wipes because they sting more.’ Rosie drops the used cotton wool on her empty toast plate. ‘I don’t think I’m angry with you. I do feel angry with Mel. Like last year he said he couldn’t afford to go to Spain on holiday but you said, We’ll find the money somehow, even though you didn’t have a job. But he didn’t ask if we wanted to go to St Lucia. He just assumed we couldn’t go. You’d never do that.’

‘You know he loves you. He loves us both. We couldn’t have gone to Spain if Zelda and Amma and people hadn’t done that sponsored walk for us.’

‘Plus when he was seeing Cara he didn’t only lie to you, he lied to me too. He introduced her to me as somebody he worked with. And when he split up with you, he didn’t say it was because he met somebody else. But they didn’t suddenly get together overnight. I feel so angry and disgusted when I think about it. Sometimes I hate him.’

Stress makes illness worse, so maybe if Mel hadn’t dumped Jay, Rosie wouldn’t have developed leukaemia. It’s been easier for Jay with Mel away because she no longer has to split herself between being what Rosie wants and trying to work out what Mel wants, it’s as if she and Mel are hardly adults at all but toddlers carrying machetes who lurch around hacking at each other by mistake, it seems impossible to say any of this to Rosie.

Rosie fans her wound with a card from her bedside table. ‘Air-drying.’

‘Sometimes you hate me, too. It’s normal when you love someone. Have you ever talked about it to him?’

‘Shush a minute. I like this song.’

Rosie has her laptop open on her bedside table, the music sounds tinny, the speakers are rubbish. Jay feels touched because the track is Hopeton Lewis singing Take It Easy, which Jay used to sing to her when she was a baby: no need to hurry. Her teachers when she started school always said she was lovely but so slow, as though doing things fast is a virtue.

‘Leave it open to the air to help it get better. I’m seeing Elsa this morning, so we could try to set off at lunchtime.’

‘I’ll make a mix CD for the car. You’ve got to pick six tracks and I’ll pick six. Or we could agree on twelve.’

They end up playing the CD in the house because by the time Jay cycles back from her counselling session the snow is lying so thickly on the side roads that her bike skids and tips. Rosie agrees to ask the gods what they should do, they say a prayer and pick numbers for the Kuan Yin oracle, Jay gets fifty-eight, Foreign Lands, which says, ‘Be patient and stay right where you are.’ When Rosie ends up with ten, Jade and Precious Jewels: ‘Why wander? The crop is rich and will soon be ready right here at home,’ she concedes they should stay in Ipswich.

Next day the dentist gives Jay an injection and says in her Russian accent that she'll have to extract the tooth. Jay feels so demented with pain that if Mrs O'Keefe were to say, We'll have to saw your head off, Jay would beg her to get it over with as quickly as possible. Mrs O'Keefe latches onto the tooth with pliers, braces her other hand against the back of the chair and a foot against its base, tugs and twists, sweat springs out around the edges of her forehead, she grips the pliers with both hands and finally manages to wrestle the tooth out of Jay's head, it makes a crunching noise, she tucks a roll of gauze against the cavity in Jay's gums and tells her to take it easy for the rest of the day.

Jay has to cycle straight home because Zelda and Amma are on their way from the station in a taxi, Rosie's at school doing drama. Jay dared not drive because she took some of Rosie's diclofenac.

She phones Zelda as she exits the dentist's offices, she wants to say, I'm on my way home but it comes out as, 'I o I ay o.'

'What?'

'Ee oo i a i-i.'

'What? We're outside the house.'

'Ssee oo shoon.'

'OK.'

She cycles as fast as she can through the slush, her mouth fills with blood, she spits it into the gutter. Her miraculous blood is transporting platelets to seal the wound, white cells to fight invading bacteria and oxygen to give life but she wishes it weren't, she wishes it could be her blood that was dysfunctional rather than Rosie's.

She rides along side streets on impacted snow and falls off the bike in front of Zelda and Amma. They stare in astonishment, they burst out laughing. Jay begins to laugh and cry at the same time. Her week of toothache has helped her to understand how Rosie might prefer death to a life that consists of nothing but pain.

The florist delivers a bunch of lilies, stocks and thistles from Mel: stylish flowers. The building society phones to say Jay and Rosie have won a bottle of champagne. Everything seems incomprehensible.

Next day Jay goes for a walk in the snow with Zelda on a dyke that separates the North Sea from the flat pale land, while Amma stays with Rosie with a list of

instructions about whom to call in case of emergency. Jay confides that she wants to go to Norwich for a digital photography course but she doesn't know whether she can leave Rosie. Zelda confides that Rick is nothing but miserable day after day, week after week. Jay admits that although she loves Mel, he's unable to offer any commitment after seventeen years together.

'Sometimes I think I'm too damaged by losing my father and all the lies to have an intimate relationship. Mel says I should get over what happened when I was a child but I can't always manage it.'

'But from what you say, Mel has issues too. It must have something to do with his own childhood that in order for him to feel like a man he has to have sex at least twice a week every week. At least you look at your baggage and try to deal with it.'

'I love him but I feel confused.'

'I used to envy your relationship. When I was splitting up with Kenny, or when Rick and I have been banged up in the same house making each other miserable. You didn't live together but you were always happy with each other, and it seemed like you had a great sex life. It's so hard for you all at the moment, with everything you're going through.'

Fourteen

Feebs and Megs and Barbie are the best friends ever. We get ready round at mine to go to an under-sixteens night club at the Corn Exchange. Afterwards Mel will fetch us back for a sleepover because he's working late. Feebs puts on a Michael Jackson CD and we invent a dance routine to Thriller. Not the Moonwalk: we try that but it's so stupid we fall on the sofa laughing.

Mum lets me order pizza and asks should she stay out of the way but I say she can eat with us. She found out from everybody's mothers that it's all right for them to drink a glass of cava. We get dressed and do our makeup and hair.

'Four pairs of tongs on the go,' says Feebs.

'Hope it doesn't overload the electrical circles,' says Megs.

'Circuits, you muppet,' says Feebs.

'That's why I've plugged mine in over here,' I go.

'Tongs and thongs,' says Barbie. 'Hey, that rhymes.'

'I can't see the mirror,' goes Megs.

'Mirror, mirror, on the wall, why can't I grow tall?' asks Feebs.

'You are a pocket Venus,' I say.

'Pocket penis,' says Barbie.

'I am Aphrodite, queen of love,' goes Feebs. She makes a hideous face in the mirror and we piss ourselves laughing.

Mum drops us off and leaves the car for Mel. We join the queue with all people from school, and other schools, and it's so great not to be in uniform but going to a real nightclub. Some people have got drinks like Breezers or cider but there are men and women bouncers who search you and your handbag. We stand in the queue for ages under the streetlights. In the orange sky a big orange moon rises, like the god of peace and harmony is shining down on us.

We're fooling around when Mel comes out of work. I hope he won't come over.

He comes over and says, 'Hi Rosa, hi Rosa's friends.'

I hope he'll go away but he stands there chatting and then goes, 'Ah, your first night-club. Go to get back to work. Give me a hug, darlin.'

Nobody else's parents are there so I wish a big hole would open in the pavement and swallow me up. But after he's gone, Feebs goes, 'Your step-dad is nice.'

For one thing, we have an agreement not to disrespect anybody's family even if that person has trouble with them. For another, you have to take control of your life and think positive. Like right now I have a choice: I could let Mel being there embarrass me and I could worry about my hair and let those things ruin my evening. Or I can get on and realise that everyone feels self-conscious, and have a laugh with my friends.

'Actually, he's my dad,' I say. 'He's been around since I was a baby.'

Then the queue starts moving and we go in and dance and drink Cokes but it's not as much fun as getting ready at home.

Hospital seems more real than my birthday party. I've been in five times in the last couple of weeks. I feel sick and I've got a stabbing pain like some demon is sticking a knife through my belly button towards my right hip. Mum looked up appendicitis and brought me in.

The Paediatric Assessment Unit has the biggest Easter egg I've ever seen, milk chocolate decorated with white piping flowers and wrapped in cellophane. Erroll, the nurse, says he's going to smash it with a hammer tomorrow and I can help. They put me and Mum in a treatment room that has a couch and a trolley, two chairs, a sink and a fluorescent light. No window or telly. Because all the rooms for children are full.

I close my right hand round my locket. I'm seventeen. I feel knackered and ill. I can't remember what it feels like to be well. Come to think of it, I might never have been well in my entire life. Nobody in fact knows how anybody else feels. When they admit you to a children's ward they give you a sheet of paper with a row of round faces so you can tell them how much pain you're in and the first is a smiley face but gradually the eyebrows slant up in the middle and the smile turns upside down until the last mouth is open and black as though it's howling, while the eyes are shut with tears spurting out of them. But whichever one you identify with, you're only comparing yourself to your own state at other times and not to anyone else's.

A surgeon arrives and presses into my belly with his fingers. It really hurts. He says if I didn't have low blood counts and neutropenia they'd whip my appendix out today. They have to phone Dr Baldwin.

When the surgeon leaves, I do my imitation of the actor who plays Beth in *Little Women* overacting her deathbed scene with a quavery voice and rolling eyes to make Mum laugh. My mum is in denial. We've spent even more time there lately than we have in hospital. She's wearing the wrap dress I made her buy in Topshop over jeans and no makeup and she looks tired. I love her so much but life is too hard. I've tried my best but I don't want to do well in spite of

everything. I want to do well, full stop. But I can't remember all the names and dates for Psychology and I haven't been able to dance because of my leg and some of my hospital photos are good but my digital montage is all wrong because I missed the lesson where the teacher explained photo montage. I feel OK with Megs, Feebs and Barbie but my new friends lose touch if I miss school and stop trusting me. I don't want to have to choose what to wear so it will hide my scars and bruises. Nobody I like will ever spread his dreams under my feet. I'll never be normal. It isn't normal to spend four hours on a treatment couch clutching your baby blanket when you're seventeen. Martha says when you die of leukaemia it's quite peaceful like the tide going out.

Mum holds my hand.

I say, 'I don't want you to be disappointed in me.'

'I'll never be disappointed in you. I'm so proud of you. You're wonderful. Dr Crispin said last week you're his favourite patient.'

'He said, I don't want to keep you waiting because you're my favourite patient. He said it really loudly, right in the corridor in front of all his other patients who were sitting there waiting.'

We're laughing but then Mum gets serious again.

'You've had enough suffering to last anybody a lifetime, but all you've given me is happiness.'

'I love you, Mum.'

Dr Baldwin wants Rosie to have IV antibiotics and GCSF so they put her in H Bay in Mildenhall with a Little Mermaid duvet cover. Mel likes Ariel, which is hardly surprising because for one he loves to be under the sea and, for two, Ariel has red hair but in spite of that she's the hero of the film. Usually the black girl isn't the hero either but maybe the hero's best friend like in Clueless and Harriet the Spy and A Little Princess. Also the person who's ill isn't the hero, like Bailey in Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants.

Mum undoes Rosie's forever heart and locket in case of X-rays and puts them in the zip pocket of her bag. Mel arrives and he likes her duvet cover and he keeps her company after Mum goes home, till she falls asleep.

Dr Stuart does rounds next day. He smiles and says, 'I think you're spending far too much time here, young lady.'

Rosie wishes he was still her doctor. He says she has to stay nil by mouth until they decide whether she's going to theatre. They want to do an ultrasound even if it won't be conclusive with appendicitis, also another X-ray because chest infections can sometimes lead to abdominal pain. Then he asks if she has a regular boyfriend. What's that got to do with anything? She feels so humiliated that she hasn't got a proper boyfriend. She hates him.

Mum sees how mortified she feels. 'Are you in a regular relationship?' she asks him, so that he looks embarrassed. 'She doesn't understand why you're asking.'

He explains that somebody could have pains in their abdomen if they get pregnant and the foetus starts to grow in a fallopian tube. It's called an ectopic pregnancy.

'I'll go out of the room if you like,' says Mum. 'You just need to say if it's possible or impossible.'

Rosie looks at Ariel's red hair swirling around and says, 'Impossible.'

They decide to give her platelets and two units of red cells and send her for surgery at seven. They give her paracetamol and morphine for the pain. This is the first time she's had morphine that she can remember because she never wanted to get addicted to drugs but now she's like, fuck it, whatever. It gets to seven but not even one unit of blood has gone in, and by the time the platelets have gone through the surgeon comes in and says they've got a triple-A case in theatre, so Rosie will have to wait.

'What's a triple-A case?' she asks.

The surgeon has a lumpy forehead as though he's a vampire who's gone bumpy. He says, 'Someone who's very, very ill,' with a prim, disapproving look like Mrs Winsome.

'Well I wasn't asking their name, only what triple-A means,' Rosie says after he leaves. 'Anyway, I thought I was very very ill. I don't know how you can be much iller than this.'

Maybe they're leaving her till last because she is going to die anyway.

About eleven the surgeon comes and says they'll fetch her in twenty minutes. He gives her pre-meds but she and her mum are so used to hospitals that they carry on getting ready for bed.

She's floating on a pink cloud when her cloud crashes into a rickety tower. They're going to make her climb it for a sacrifice to open the portal between worlds. She falls into the dark water below the dock.

'Everybody loves you,' says her mum. Her voice is a float Rosie grabs to save her from drowning. 'The bed caught on the lift door. You're safe, and the operation will make you better.'

A hobbit tells her to relax but he's putting potion in her cannula and holding a helmet over her nose and pressing on her neck. He's going to kill her so how can she relax? He isn't a hobbit but a dwarf because he has a beard and she peers down to see whether his feet are bare and hairy but he says, 'Try to relax. You'll feel some pressure on your neck to stop you vomiting. Keep your eyes open, so I'll know when you're asleep.'

She'll count because she never knows how long it takes to fall asleep, but not backwards from one hundred because that's too difficult. One, two, three, four—

The two witches who love each other put the kitten on my bed. I can't open my mouth. I can't speak. They've taken my voice away again. I try to make a noise. That one is kneeling by my bed holding my hand. She's not the snake, she's my mum. The kitten floats behind the curtains. Miss Kitty prints herself on the curtains until they're spotted with kittens. Where's my Daisy? They have taken my voice away. They've taken my Daisy away. There's a pain that's crouching behind a pillar. It's in my belly soon it will bite my throat. It has picked me up and thrown me against the walls and smashed my hips and belly.

The witch with the wide hips says my blood oxygen is low and fastens a lunchbox over my nose. The gas hisses and I fall face down in the water, drowning. I will come back from the dead. He breathes into my lungs and the breath hisses and makes me float. The red-haired witch says she'll do a spell to take the pain away. She can't find a doctor so she gets the other witch to help her. The pain goes pink and I forget moment to moment the witch brings me pink lollies but they don't taste sweet they're made of scratchy sponge she dips them in water I forget everything and float away.

The sky behind the maternity tower and the crematorium chimney blazes red and gold, layers upon layers of molten colour. A flock of starlings shimmers and chatters against the clouds higher up.

‘How are you?’ Jay asks, because she has Elsa to talk to on Fridays but she’s not sure whether Mel opens his heart even to Siouxsie, he’s a diamond, compressed into strength and brilliance by all the shit he never talks about.

‘This is the worst time in my life.’

‘It must be really hard for you when you’ve got to run the cinema and there’s nobody to take over, so you don’t have space to cope with what’s going on for Rosie.’

‘I want my life back.’ Mel’s face crumples, his breathing makes a noise and tears roll down his cheeks. ‘My life when I was happy and Rosa was well, and things were normal.’

Mel still has a job and a pension but Jay has nothing apart from looking after Rosie, she wishes that one single time he could show that he understands how hard it is for her, she reaches her arms around him, she rubs her cheek against his stubble. He smells of stale tobacco, a sharp, repulsive smell, he tugs his hankie from his pocket and blows his nose, when he moves away it feels like rejection.

They go inside and sit in the canteen to eat baked potatoes.

‘What are your plans for the weekend?’ Why would she ask that? With Rosie in hospital, how can they have any plans?

‘Lie down and have a cuddle with you.’

His nose looks hooked and predatory, his cheeks have sagged into jowls and the exclamation marks between his brows have become more emphatic than the laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. If she could be honest with him, he’d become beautiful again, she knows about the subjectivity of perception because she grew up with a family whom she perceived as ugly and annoying because of all the lies and suppressed emotions. She and Mel are trying so much too hard to support Rosie and to be mature, responsible and loving that all the childish, selfish bits end up squirting out on each other. This is the worst time in Mel’s life, why can’t she say, Please hold onto me so I won’t float away on my iceberg?

‘I kind of feel safer since we haven’t been having sex. Because I asked if you’d make some commitment to me, and you haven’t.’

‘Don’t you worry I’ll go off and have sex with someone else?’ he asks.

‘Apparently it’s exactly as good for you to have sex on your own.’

‘But not as enjoyable.’

She forces herself to swallow a mouthful of potato and coleslaw. The noise of his chewing makes her aware of her own ribs in that sick way you can feel your bones when you have flu. Of all the possible responses. He might have said, That makes me feel rejected, or, I’ll try to seduce you, or, I’ll wait until you feel ready. Not a diamond after all, some hydrocarbon compound out under the North Sea beyond the drowned villages, millions of years of natural death, once-living trees and beautiful leaves decayed into sediment: coal and oil, from which humans release the living flame but now it’s gushing up, all the damage done, out of control, killing seals, fish and seabirds, their dead bodies float blackened on the poisonous surface and rather than heavy chemicals and microbes for dispersal and clean-up, Jay is trying to cover the spill with an Elastoplast.

She fumbles for patience.

‘Are you? Are you going to have sex with someone else?’

‘I don’t want to threaten you, but I wouldn’t want to wait around for ever.’

‘If I had a machine gun, I’d mow them all down,’ she says. ‘My next-door neighbours, and the useless doctors, and Bush and Blair and anybody else who kills children in Iraq or Guatemala or the UK or any fucking where in the world. If you had a button you could press to kill some wicked people and make Rosie well, would you do it?’

He leans across and kisses her cheek.

‘I’d even kill good people if it would save Rosa. If my hands were tied behind my back, I’d press the button with my nose,’ he says.

Jay starts to laugh.

‘I’d kill the Pope to save her without a second thought. I’d massacre the entire Vatican City.’

‘I’m so relieved you want to kill people too.’

‘If they locked my head in a clamp, I’d get an erection and try to press the button with my penis.’

‘I love you,’ she says, and means it.

Rosie screams, ‘Help. Help. I’m sorry, I’ll never do it again.’

Let go. Breathe. Stay with her.

‘Take it away, somebody. Take it away.’

‘Let it out, baby.’

‘Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I wish they’d give me some cyanide to get it over and done with.’

‘I’ll go and ask again.’ Breathe.

Is this how someone dies? Giving up, little by little. Pain takes over. Her digestion stops working her lungs don’t function properly then her eyes can’t focus.

Rosie says, ‘Take me home. I want it to stop.’

Jay asks, ‘Do you want to get better, or just let go?’

Rosie turns her head to one side as Jay says get better, she nods at let go.

Jay says, ‘I’ll take you home to lie on the sofa if you want.’

‘I’m worried they won’t give me enough painkillers.’

‘Martha’s promised to give you as much pain relief as you need.’ Jay touches her daughter’s fingers. ‘I don’t even know if I should talk to you like this.’

Rosie strokes Jay’s hand. ‘I’m glad you do.’

She reaches for Jay’s bag and takes out her locket.

‘Put it on, Mum. I want you to have it back. My forever hearts are only light but it’s too heavy for me now. I’ve put something inside for you.’

Hospitals drive Mel crazy. When he gets back from smoking a cigarette he disinfects his hands and presses the buzzer but he can’t see anybody at the nurses’ station. A pale figure bustles across the grey screen into the communal bay. He buzzes again. When somebody finally lets him in, he asks Rosa if anybody has brought her painkillers.

‘Not yet. It hurts worse.’

‘I’ll go and ask,’ he says.

This is unbearable. This is not his life. There are fish in the corridor that live out their entire lifespans in a glass tank that measures a third of a metre by a metre and contains pebbles and plastic weed: an approximation of a life.

They say the pain medication is on its way.

‘I’ll tidy up a bit before Jay gets back and then I’ll read to you. Or we could watch a movie.’

Rosa’s lips are pale. She has dark circles under her eyes and her hair’s tied back in a scarf. She manages to smile. When they went to the Maharani for her birthday, with Siouxsie, Rosa looked as if she was fading away. When she had her party at the cinema she seemed almost normal. Jay says they think the 5-aza is working, but who knows?

He crams used wipes into the bin along with paper towels and the newspaper. Yellow bag for biohazardous materials, no sharps.

‘Hasn’t anybody emptied the bin today?’

He revisits the nurses’ station to ask where he can find a bin-liner.

‘It’s been written up. It’s here,’ says a nurse who thinks he’s insisting on pain relief.

‘We’ll have to ask a cleaner,’ she says about the bin.

The clock in Rosa’s room ticks, not a sharp single beat but a double sound like two men marching side by side. The wind roars softly round the building. A small child is crying along the corridor. Women talk in the distance. Rosa’s snoozing against the pillows. From outside the door he hears the snap of someone pulling on plastic gloves and the rustle of an apron. The nurse with oramorph and paracetamol for Rosa. Finally.

When he goes to the parents’ room for a cup of tea, a woman in tight jeans with studs on the pockets asks if he wants sugar. She passes him a canister.

She says, ‘My daughter’s in here but she can’t see anybody till Tuesday.’

‘That must be frustrating.’

‘Well, she tried to take her own life with an overdose.’

Way too much information.

‘Sorry to hear that. It must be very difficult.’

‘It’s not the first time. I’ve asked about drugs but they reckon the drugs give them suicidal thoughts. She’s thirteen and I can’t cope. I want them to put

her in an assessment unit for a few days. She can't keep any friends. She's too paranoid.'

'Well, good luck. I've got to get back to my daughter.'

Jay seems completely sane after Mrs Needy. Jay would never relinquish Rosa for a few days to an assessment unit, a hospice, or anywhere except round his house because he's her father and he loves her.

He reads to her until she falls asleep.

Jay comes back and they nip outside so he can smoke. When she asks how he is, he tries to be honest. Except for when he was in St Lucia, everything seems to have turned black and white instead of technicolour. Voices, music and soundtracks have become muted mono rather than surround sound. He's living in Kansas before the tornado, Hollywood before the talkies.

'This is the worst time in my life,' he says.

'It must be difficult for you, because you're trying to do your job and you can't take too much time off to cope with what's going on for Rosie. Can't somebody else keep the cinema going?'

'I want my life back,' he says: 'My life when I was happy, and Rosa was well and things were normal.'

He wants her to ask what he means. He'd like to explain how hurt he feels at being left out. Jay and Rosa have formed an exclusive dyad and everybody says what a wonderful mother Jay is. Everybody says how brave and fabulous Rosa is, while Mel feels as though he's become invisible. He knows other men who felt this way when their children were babies.

He stubs out his cigarette.

'Oh thank god. Let's go inside.' Jay's shivering.

She has vouchers so they only pay the subsidised rate in the canteen. The skins are soggy and the insides of their jacket potatoes are overcooked.

'What else d'you want to do this weekend?' she asks, over a clatter of metal from the kitchens.

'Lie down and have a cuddle with you.'

'Do you mean sex? It's been less complicated lately, because I haven't worried about whether you find me attractive. I haven't been spending loads of energy trying to make things all right between us.'

He mashes grated cheddar into his potato, which isn't hot enough to melt the cheese. What does she want him to say? He's just told her that he finds her attractive. Is she being deliberately cruel? She knows that his worst fear is to be trapped in a relationship too dry to include a physical reality that extends beyond convention. If she's not interested in him, he might have to find a woman who is. Whenever he's had an affair Jay's thought about where she went wrong and put extra effort into making their sex life so fabulous and exciting that he wouldn't be tempted to wander.

'Don't you worry that I'll go off and have sex with somebody else?'

She glances around as though someone might be listening but all the other families, staff members and patients in the huge canteen are seated at distant tables.

'Are you going to have sex with somebody else?'

'I wouldn't want to wait around forever for you to change your mind.'

'I've been there for you and put you first for fifteen years before Rosie got diagnosed with leukaemia. I wish you could be there for me.'

'I am there for you.'

'I know you're there for Rosie,' she says, 'but I don't know if you're there for me.'

She'll twist it around with words until he feels guilty and confused. It's fairly simple. Rosa is going to die. He can manage a few months, and then it will be over. When you die, that's it. Over. Since he can't do anything to prevent it, he might as well try to make life bearable by experiencing some human warmth and fun. If Jay were truly in a terrible state she couldn't manage to eat her baked potato, which she's nearly finished.

'I don't really feel like talking about it right now. I'm too worried about Rosa,' he says.

Rosa is lying on the white bed with her hair matted into dreadlocks. Cannula in her right elbow because they can't find a vein in her hand. Oxygen floods into a mask that covers her nose and mouth; it hisses with the same sound as that made by water pipes when you leave a tap running. On its way from the wall to her lungs it filters through a plastic mug of water where a black ball floats steady at a

level between five and ten. She has a bracelet on her wrist and a dark scar near her ankle. She's breathing very fast.

It's pissing down outside. Rain spatters against the glass door. Jay, Martha and Charles Baldwin join him round Rosa's bed. Jay wakes Rosa.

The consultant says, 'I'm very sorry to tell you this, but we can't make you better this time.'

Rosa says, 'Oh.'

Mel's trying not to cry. Jay is crying and holding Rosa's hand; Rosa's other hand is clutching her blanket, so he takes hold of Jay's spare hand.

Rosa says, 'Gosh.'

She says, 'Every time I don't wash my hair I get ill.'

Jay produces the bottle of brandy she bought last year in Spain from her bag. Martha fetches glasses. Jay administers a homeopathic remedy for grief to Rosa, Mel, Martha and herself. The consultant declines the remedy but accepts a shot of brandy. Martha mixes shandy for Rosa.

Rosa says, 'I feel partly relieved, because I don't have to decide whether to keep making an effort.'

Mel knew this was coming. This is not his real life.

Fifteen

Ah the stars shine bright outside the Pool Club. We tip out into the magic night. Metal tinkles on the tops of masts and water laps against the dock. I look around to check that Feebs and Megs haven't disappeared. I'm holding Danny's hand. Danny pulls me into the shadows. His face gets closer to mine. My heart pounds. I don't know if it's love or nerves. His lips touch mine. My first proper kiss. His tongue nudges between my lips and I can smell rather than taste his saliva. It smells like Siouxsie's dog when he gets wet.

Over his shoulder I can see two bright stars close together. They are the girl with the boy's name who was locked in a tower on an island and the boy with the girl's name who swam across the sea to reach her. They died but their love for one another was so strong that they shine forever as stars in the night.

'Look at the stars,' I say.

He turns and then turns back and presses against me. I can feel his hard-on poking against my belly. This is who I'm meant to be, under the stars with a boy whose tongue feels hot and alive in my mouth. A boy who wants me. My life is only just beginning and anything is possible.

Back at school Danny's all like, Wassup? Should I ask him to go to the movies with us on Friday? Does he feel as confused as I do or is he not bothered? When we go to the movies he holds my hand in the dark and we snog. But in the light he treats me as a friend like everyone else. Is he my boyfriend? Am I allowed to tell people?

Everything suddenly turns into total and utter crap. Mel cheated on Mum but she still loves him. He split up with her but now they're back together but he's still seeing the other lady and Mum cries all the time. She's always telling Mel how much she loves him, like if she doesn't tell him every time she sees him he'll forget and leave. She keeps wearing dresses with high heels and stockings even though she doesn't look comfortable and she's too old for that kind of outfit. She's insecure and she's lost loads of weight. I hate Mel for what

he's done. I hate him because he introduced me to Cara and she was all friendly. He's made me feel stupid and betrayed.

Everyone thinks I'm happy. I pretend that I let everything wash over me but I don't. I do my makeup and I paint my nails the colour of the roses that grow on spiny hedges round Sleeping Beauty's palace. I go upstairs and cry when I get home. I can't concentrate on lessons and one time I cry at school and Danny doesn't even comfort me. He looks embarrassed and edges away. My mates put their arms around me. After that I don't return his texts. I feel crap all the time and my stomach hurts and I can't get rid of the cough I've had for a month and I am fat and ugly but I don't cut myself.

Megs, Feebs, Barbie and Tom squash onto the big green sofa and the stupid little sofa that makes an alright sofa bed. They look all cheerful like they want to pretend it's normal for Rosie to be lying in bed in the sitting room with machines that manufacture oxygen out of air.

'It's freakin freezing outside,' says Tom.

'It's like winter,' Megs agrees.

'Glaciated and frigorific,' adds Feebs.

'Don't let's talk about the weather, my best friends forever,' Rosie says. 'This is the big adventure. I'm not going to get better from this and I believe for this one time only we need to express what we really feel.... I know I said I didn't want people crying and being sorry for me, but now's your chance.'

They all look stunned, literally, like somebody has snuck up behind and hit them over the head. Rosie realises that Bonita's never been to see her but it doesn't even matter because these are her real friends.

'Martha's coming later to answer questions, OK? Nobody wants to say anything, so I'm gonna start. I don't know how I would have got through the last two years without you lot, and I mean that, from my heart. Hell, the last five years.

'Megs, do you remember when we used to go to St John's Ambulance every week and it was really nerdy and we were bored but we kept going so we could have a giggle? You are a really loving person, and I'll never forget the talks we've had and the letters you wrote me in London hospital. I want to say one thing, which is: believe in yourself and don't waste your love on people who don't deserve it.'

Silent tears are pouring down Megs' face like a beautiful waterfall while Feebs on one side and Barbie on the other are hugging her.

'Feebs, you're so talented and clever and funny, and all you have to do is keep on being wonderful. The cards you made and my angel plate and all our tap classes will stay in my heart forever. Barbie, you're a star and you'll go far. That

rhymed! You're a natural leader and I totally admire and love you, but sometimes I wish you could understand a bit more how other people feel. Tom—
,

He interrupts. He's sitting on the little sofa with the window behind him but Rosie can see that he is crying too.

'Ro-Ro.'

He does this massive sniff. Barbie passes him a tissue.

'Nuff love,' he says. 'I listened to what you said last year. Fuck: two years ago. Shit, that took a long time to get through my thick skull. I been getting to work on time and taking it serious because I want to make something of my life. If you can't. They gave me promotion to assistant manager. They gave me proper time off this arvo because you're ill.'

Now Rosie's crying and her nose goes swollen and blocked and her chest heaves and jerks and her belly hurts.

'I want to hug you but I don't want to hurt you,' says Megs.

'I need hugs.' Rosie still has something to say to Tom but she can't speak.

Everyone piles on the bed in a massive group hug and then settles back on the sofas and starts talking at once but she goes, 'Let me finish, people! Lend me your ears,' which makes them crack up.

'Tom, you drongo, I wasn't going to tell you off. I was going to say I've known you longer than anyone, and you are gold, and I remember going on the swing with you when we were brats, and you're always in my heart. But I'm glad you're going to make something of your life.'

Then they all shower Rosie with love and say she's brave and funny and beautiful and kind.

'And sensitive and perspicacious,' says Feebs.

'You're the only person I've never heard say a bad word about anybody else,' says Barbie.

Rosie thinks about Rebecca Dixon-Craig who picks her spots and her nails and who everybody is mean to and now she's dying she wishes she'd stood up for her rather than say nothing, but it's too late.

Mum comes in carrying a tray with a bowl of strawberries and five glasses of Cava and then goes out again. She's being very tactful. They clink glasses and go, 'Cheers!'

The wine sizzles on Rosie's tongue. She swallows and says, 'You've got to promise me you'll keep your forever hearts forever. You don't have to wear them all the time, but don't lose them.'

'I'm going to get a tattoo for you,' says Barbie. 'A curly R on the inside of my wrist, here.' She pushes her sleeve and bracelet out of the way.

'For one, your wrist is the most painful place, which I know from having cannulas,' Rosie says.

'I want to get one too,' says Megs. 'I don't care about the pain.'

They're so annoying. They have no idea. 'For two, a tattoo is absolutely permanent, and I don't want you to get one for me. What will you say in twenty years' time, when you're divorced and getting married again, and your new husband asks, Who is this R?'

'But you'll be in my heart forever,' says Barbie. 'So why not on my wrist?'

'Get a tattoo for you, then, not for me.'

Then Barbie and Megs are both shouting.

Rosie goes, 'Stop shouting at me.'

Feebs and Tom say, 'Stop shouting at her.'

'Shut up, you twat,' Feebs says to Barbie.

'You stink,' Barbie says.

'I don't stink because I shower. You stink.'

'I shower, you penis.'

'Tom's feet stink,' says Megs.

'Yeah, you stink, you pleb,' says Barbie.

'I don't stink. You stink, you fanny,' says Tom.

Oh great. We are all so mature.

Aaron comes to visit and he sits on the green sofa with his knees touching my bed and says, 'This poem describes you.'

He reads it out of a tatty book the colour of a red rose:

‘She walks in beauty like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies,
and all that’s best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes; thus
mellowed to that tender light which Heaven to gaudy day denies.’

Then there’s a bit about raven tresses and serenely sweet thoughts.

‘And on that cheek and o’er that brow, so soft, so calm, yet eloquent, the
smiles that win, the tints that glow, but tell of days in goodness spent, a mind at
peace with all below, a heart whose love is innocent.’

It’s a poem about me. I am a dark beauty and I do my best to put up with
everything and be kind to people, and hope and endure, which is spending my
days in goodness. Like the bit Martha told me from the Bible about love is
patient, love is kind. Love never ends.

I wish.

It’s actually Malika who reads me that poem, which is kind of nice in its
own way. She used to be in the year above me and now she’s left school. We’ve
never got on, maybe because when we were little kids she thought I was spoiled,
but now I feel like she’s given me a present and it’s something wonderful. And
also because I’m dying she can’t possibly believe I’m spoiled.

She’s been lying there on her own. She’s been dozing and drowsing, in and out
of shadows that wave and flicker. She needs a drink of apple juice with lemon
and fizzy water. She pulls the mask away from her face and calls out to the
monitor.

‘Mum!’

She can’t go and look. If Mum is hanging out the washing she should
take the monitor with her because she said she’d always keep it within reach.
She should always keep Rosie within reach.

‘Mum! I need you!’

Suppose she was desperate for a pee? She can’t hardly get out of bed on
her own and she could have died while Mum was in the garden or wherever.

She can hear her mum’s footsteps and the stairs creak.

‘Coming, sweetie.’

Rosie shuts her eyes, not tight but loosely. She pretends Mum is telling
her a relaxation exercise: let your skull sink into the bed, let your eyeballs fall

back into their sockets, allow your tongue to fall back in your mouth, etcetera etcetera.

‘Are you awake? Rosie?’

She can feel her getting closer. She breathes as shallowly as she can.

‘Rosie?’ Mum sounds anxious.

She’s leaning over. Rosie stops breathing. She can smell her mum’s breath. They had strawberries.

‘Rosie? I’m going to lick your nose.’

She thinks if Rosie’s awake that will make her laugh or go, Yuck! But she still feels mad at her so she’s careful not to move. She feels Mum’s tongue touch the side of her nose. Mum’s saliva smells a bit yoghurt and garlicky as well as the strawberries, and she takes hold of Rosie’s hand, gently, and puts her finger on her wrist like she’s feeling for a pulse. She must think Rosie has died.

‘I love you, babes,’ she says.

‘Boo!’ Rosie opens her eyes.

Mum totally jumps. She drops Rosie’s hand and looks frightened and puts her hand to her chest and starts laughing.

When the pain gets too big and noisy, Martha changes my pump. Martha says I won’t get addicted to morphine because if you only use it when you have physical agony, the pain absorbs the drug so it’s functional rather than habit forming. She’s wearing a pink tracksuit with a butterfly on the jumper. She looks beautiful. She reads to me in the lamplight.

‘Read The Wild Iris,’ I say.

At the end of my suffering there will be a door. I will return to find a voice.

Diamorphine is the same as heroin. When Mel tells Jay, she gives him a queen-of-all-evil look and hisses, ‘Don’t say that to Rosie. She doesn’t want to be a fucking drug addict.’

Rosa would say, Don’t swear. They’re standing outside the back door. After Easter it rained for three weeks and now it’s winter again. He has to put his jacket on to smoke a cigarette. It would comfort him to think that his syringe

driver contained heroin, with its connotations of Velvet-Underground, Trainspotting glamour and rebellion, rather than morphine that's a hospital-type, old person's drug. Mel has always imagined that when he grows old he'll use heroin. Martha's toolbox in the kitchen contains ampoules of diamorphine. He wonders whether he could abstract one without anybody noticing. Except there's an itemised list. Jay used to say her favourite drug was opium because it makes everything clear and dreamy when you smoke; it's bad for your health but she'd take it up when she was seventy. When they first got together they both smoked cigarettes; they both smoked a spliff every day, Jay in the morning and Mel at night. They both considered people who went to psychoanalysis or psychotherapy to be not only self-indulgent wankers but also prolonging their own misery by focusing on traumatic events rather than getting on with life. Now it seems only Mel retains that belief.

'Thanks for changing her bed,' says Jay. 'And talking to Megan's mum.'

'I only offered her a glass of wine so she wouldn't drag Megan away.'

'It was doing my head in, her drivelling on about her raw food diet. I wanted to say, Our daughter is fucking dying so nobody gives a fuck about your veggie juice.'

'I might have to start back at work on Monday. I can't keep taking compassionate leave or the cinema will close. It's already been over a week.'

His turn to sleep in the lounge. He snuggles under the duvet on the bed settee. The oxygen concentrators sound like the helicopters in *Apocalypse Now* without the Ride-of-the-Valkyries music.

Rosie exhales in a snore, louder than the helicopter. Then a pause. Is that the end?

Strenuous inhalation. It feels terrible to lie in the dark unable to help, wondering whether each breath will be her last. The helicopter lands next to the River Adur. He's walking home from school with Siouxsie. They've stopped to scoop frogspawn from the pond when Rosa calls his name.

'Bad dream.'

'Ssshhh, you're safe.'

He drags himself across to stroke her hand, which is bandaged. All the times he comforted her in the night when she was a little girl. Jay would elicit her fears.

‘What did you dream?’

‘Scary. It was the Grim Reaper. I was asking you and Mum and Feebs and Megs to change places with me, but you ignored me. I was hitting you with my teddies to try to wake you up. And then I was calling out but you didn’t answer. I wasn’t sure if I was still dreaming.’

‘Sshh-sshh, love, no Grim Reaper here.’

Rosa asks, ‘Can you buy three buddleia bushes? The earrings I bought are in my desk drawer. And can you email Zelda and ask her to do the banner for Mum like we planned?’

She’s planning Jay’s birthday, in case she won’t be here; he wonders whether she’s planning his birthday in secret, with Jay. She’s planning her own funeral. She’s chosen a wicker coffin. It is absolutely wrong.

‘Will you email people, so Mum doesn’t have to?’ she asks later. ‘I want everyone to bring a single flower or a small bunch of flowers, like from their garden or something, and give the money they would have spent at the florist to Save the Children.’

He can’t bear it. He wants a cigarette. He runs his hand through his hair. He needs a haircut. He needs to see the dentist. The tooth aches at the touch of his tongue.

‘I don’t want anybody to wear black. Not even you....Please can you write it down? So you’ll remember.’

He can feel the hash smoke in his lungs spacing him out and relaxing him. Birds jostle and caw above the cemetery. His daughter’s voice issues faintly from the baby alarm clipped to his belt. A couple more seconds. He swigs wine to wash down a last toke before heading into the dark house.

Rosa’s crouched on the stairs. Jay appears at the top.

‘What’s up, chick?’ she asks.

‘I wanted to change my PJs.’ Rosa’s weeping. Her voice shrinks to a whisper. ‘I leaked a bit.’

‘Oh sweetie, that’s normal,’ says Jay.

He and Jay support Rosa to the bathroom. He leaves Jay to help her to wash. Ever since Rosa’s body began to change when she was about eleven, she’s hidden from him. Once she’s in clean pyjamas they prop her downstairs again.

‘Go back to bed,’ he says to Jay.

She tugs him into the hallway and hisses at him.

‘Why can’t you put Rosie’s wellbeing first for a few hours? You’re so selfish. You could have had a spliff and a glass of wine before I went to bed.’

‘I was looking after her. I was listening to the intercom and I was right behind her as soon as I knew she was heading for the stairs.’

‘I don’t know why you even bother.’

‘Oh, nobody can look after her as well as you can. We all know that.’

‘I hate you! Why don’t you just fuck off!’

There it is. Finally. The truth. She hates him. Well, he will fuck off if that’s what she wants. He’s been at work today. He’s doing his best. He doesn’t need the grief. It won’t be long now, then he can begin his life again. He needs a bit of human warmth and kindness.

He finds himself in the car, heading for Cara’s street. He doesn’t know what he’ll do if she’s not in. The streetlights are blurred. He hasn’t got his glasses on. She might be out. He has to find a parking space. Remember to lock the car. He has to stumble round the corner and along the street. He has to knock. He waits while footsteps approach and Cara opens the door wearing some kind of caftan.

‘Let me in. I need you.’

Surely everyone’s allowed to say I hate you once in a relationship? Surely he can forgive her? She’s managed to forgive him so many times.

‘You’re not the only one who can be grumpy. I’m fed up,’ Rosie says in the morning.

‘I don’t blame you. I’m really sorry. I left a message for Mel, to apologise.’

A fly buzzes from one end of the room to the other, it batters against each net curtain in turn, Jay tries to flap it out of the window, she doesn't want to kill anything.

'Mel's just as bad. If he'd been looking after me instead of outside smoking, I wouldn't have fallen. He always puts himself first.'

The fly stops to crawl on the back of the sofa, Jay wafts Rosie's funeral plans at it until it takes off again.

'That bloody fly's getting on my nerves,' says Rosie.

She rants and spews anger while Jay turns off the oxygen and helps her up to the bathroom, she's furious about working so hard for her GCSEs and not even passing them all, about missing school and parties, about Jay and Mel making a mess of their relationship, about having to plan her funeral rather than a party, about all the life she'll never experience: getting a job, living with someone who loves her, getting married and having a baby. Jay helps her into the bath.

'It's not your fault, but I hate not even being able to have a bath on my own. And I get so pissed off at people when they say, I love you, Rosie, you're so brave. It makes me think, Wouldn't they love me if I complained all the time? God, sorry. I've been moaning all effin' morning.'

'You're too brave. It might do you good to be more bad tempered.'

Jay feels relieved to hear Rosie venting her fury, it's real, maybe something good has resulted from her own rage last night

She crawls under Rosie's oxygen line to cuddle her on the bed. Rosie falls asleep at sunset and wakes as the light returns, as though life has been pared down to essentials, she doesn't want to watch telly, she hardly eats, she drinks water or apple juice. She wants to see people who love her, have baths, listen to poems and sleep. Peace and chaos pervade the house as they do when you bring a new baby home.

'You can imagine whatever you want. Do you want to dissolve into the light and never have to bother about anything again? Do you want your spirit to swim with dolphins, or float with clouds, or fly free among the stars?'

'I'd like to fly through the universe. It would be all twinkly and I could look at each star close up, without getting burnt to a frazzle.'

This is where they talk, heart to heart on the bed at six in the morning, or while Rosie's having her bath, while she leans back against the pink plastic or porcelain or whatever the bath is made of, if Jay were a proper twenty-first-century mother she would have earned enough money to replace the hideous tinned-salmon-pink suite with elegant white. She sits on the bath mat and dips her fingers into the bubbles until her hand touches Rosie's leg.

Rosie says, 'I'm not fed up with people. I'm only sick of the pain and illness. I want to be a guardian angel and help other children get through.'

Jay squeezes the sponge to rinse lather from Rosie's back.

'If you could have the perfect future...what would it be?'

'Mmmm, that feels nice. I think just fading away and letting go. Most of the time I feel relieved, but every now and then I realise I won't be able to take any more photos.'

'But if you could turn back time and make it come out exactly how you want. Like, I could wish for you to have a boyfriend who loves you, and you do really well in your exams, and get a place at art college in Falmouth near the beach to study photography. And maybe you break up with your boyfriend, but then you get a great job and meet someone you want to marry. What would you want, if you could choose anything at all?'

'I need to get out now.'

Jay holds a towel, Rosie steps into it and sits on the closed lid of the toilet, Jay kneels to dry her legs and feet.

Rosie touches her finger to the locket that hangs round Jay's neck. 'This is what I want. To let go and fade away. I don't know what's going to happen, but I'm not afraid anymore.'

Rub her legs gently because they are sore. Don't rub the almost-healed scar. Accept what your child wants, don't take it personally. Dry gently between her toes, feel how solid her heel is, she's still alive. Her feet are the same shape as Jay's. Her skin is paler than usual: no haemoglobin. Accept her as she is.

Jay doesn't know if she'll make it without Rosie, without being Rosie's mum, she is one of the monkeys in the experiment with the wire mother, she's learned to look after herself by learning to take care of her child and now that's all she is: Rosie's mum.

‘I’m glad you’re not afraid,’ she says. Whatever happens, you deserve only wonderful things.’

Sixteen

Summer stretches endless and full of possibilities like the endless blue. Blue is the colour of infinity. I laugh with my mates and we roll on the grass and my locket hangs warm and heavy against my neck. I am warm and dark and beautiful. I love Joe, Joe will love me. I will have a long, loving relationship with Joe. I will have a long, loving relationship with Joe. Ad infinitum means to infinity.

Ad nauseam means to vomiting. My blood won't work. How can this be? I have cancer. The old lie: dulce et decorum est pro patria mori means it is sweet and right to die for your country. When you're young it's neither sweet nor right to die for any reason at all. All over the world they're killing children. The summer turns dark and the dark sea seethes with jellyfish and dolphins swallow balloons and die and seals get poisoned by chemicals in the water and polar bears can no longer feed their babies because the icecaps are melting.

I queue up to climb on the roller coaster with my heart nearly in my throat. Once I climb on, I won't be able to get off. I queue up like a lamb in an abattoir. There's nowhere else to go. They drip poison into my blood and bombard me with toxic rays that destroy my blood and soft tissue. I am trying very hard to stay alive.

Is it my fault? Whose fault is it? Did I pray to the wrong god? Have I been bad? Did I not eat the right food or get enough exercise? Other people make no effort at all but they don't get ill. Some girls never eat vegetables and some girls don't do tap or ballet and some girls never even get one commendation certificate from school. My mum said maybe I'm too good. I don't want to be too good for this world. It's the only world I know.

I paint my nails the colour of the moon at Halloween. I don't want my mum and dad. I know they love me more than anyone but I don't want to shine with them forever, next to them in the sky. I want them to be happy together so I can get on with my life. I want to make pink cocktails with lemon vodka,

cointreau, triple sec and cranberry and I want to invent dance routines and dance them with my mates at the under-eighteens night. I want to kiss a boy whose saliva doesn't taste like wet dog and I want to be a photographer or a psychotherapist and drive a silver Toyota with a built-in CD player and satnav. I want to sit with my lover in a jacuzzi while we touch each other and snog and I want to feel the ultimate bliss of being with him. I don't want to have to fight death in the underworld. I want love that lasts forever.

At one by the light-emitting diode on the stereo, Rosie's snoring so loudly that Jay wishes her daughter would die so she can get some sleep.

At four eighteen she says, 'Mum.'

She needs the loo. Jay helps her out of bed by the light of the LED and the moon that's nearly full through the curtains, shoulder under her shoulder, arm around her ribs. Rosie's finding it difficult to breathe, difficult to balance, help her to the commode, she's gasping for air, don't let go, her eyes fall shut as though she's dropping off to sleep, her head tips right back, she seems to have drunk litres but she hardly wees at all. Don't let her die on the commode. Breathe. Don't feel scared, feel happy that Rosie's still alive and she can hold her and feel her heart beating, make the most of every second, tuck her back in bed, get some sleep.

The sun comes up and Jay starts to sweat, she shoves the duvet off. Rosie's usually awake by now, she's lying with her head propped up, a silk scarf covers her matted hair, the oxygen mask covers her nose and mouth. Her fingernails are dirty. How can her nails be dirty? She's breathing but when she inhales her ribs retract rather than rising. Fifteen years ago a consultant told Jay that was a danger sign. Death has walked into the room at last.

Today she's going to die but Jay doesn't know whether she should say anything, because how can you tell your child, You are dying now? Doctors have to tell patients, although they try to avoid it, but at least not their own child whom they love more than life. Should she say anything? If Jay were dying she'd want to experience it rather than miss it while her family pretended it wasn't happening.

Rosie opens her eyes. Jay fetches her some fizzy water.

'I think you may be dying,' she says while Rosie sips through a straw. 'Let's have some Rescue Remedy. I love you to the end of time and back.'

If Rosie was in hospital and they were trying to make her better nurses would be rushing around fetching drugs and equipment. In Ipswich Hospital. In

London they'd take their time. She is dying today. It's finally here. It's a shock. Does she wish they'd try to make her better? Not really, but that's kind of sad too.

'What colour wings are you going to have?' Mum smiles like she's trying to sound perky in a false way.

'You're allowed to be upset. If you don't cry, I might think you don't care.'

Mum's face goes all creased and her nose turns red and tears leak down her saggy cheeks. She looks beautiful. Rosie memorises her in case this is the last time she sees her. Her eyes are grey with dark circles round the edge of the irises but they look blue when she cries, and her nose is narrower than Rosie's and really long. There's no distance between them because the space is filled with love. Love is patient, love is kind. She wants to stop hurting but she doesn't want to hurt her mum.

'Gold,' she says, 'with shining feathers. What's the word? Not irascible?'

'Iridescent?'

'That's the one. Sorry to be trivial at a time like this, but I need a pee.'

Her body isn't working at all. She can't walk, even leaning on her mum. Mum phones Mel although it's really early, to come and help lift her as far as the toilet chair. Mum phones Martha because she wants a bath. She loves her dad but for him to see her in the bath would be beyond undignified, into the Valley of the Pervs. She so wants a bath but she's afraid she won't be able to get upstairs.

Jay opens the curtains onto the most beautiful day. Outside the sun and breeze are dancing together, they open roses and ripen strawberries. Inside darkness is gathering in the corners of the room, the noise of the oxygen extractors rises and falls like waves on shingle while she wipes Rosie's face and hands gently, while she brings yoghurt for Rosie's breakfast, darkness gathers around the edges of the room, around the light that is Rosie's spirit.

Rosie asks, 'Are you going to ring Mel?'

'He wanted to have a lie in and listen to the Archers.'

'I keep not being able to see anything or hear anything. You'd want him to call if you weren't here.'

Jay wishes he were here all the time so that she wouldn't have to call him, she wishes she weren't on her own trying to be strong for Rosie's sake, it's

true that she'd want to know. How can Rosie be so fucking sensible even while she's dying? Jay phones at nine forty-five and leaves a message, he must be in the shower.

What will happen after Rosie dies? Jay and Mel have shared so much, they'll have to carry on loving each other forever, she knows Mel won't let her drift away on her iceberg the way her first family did.

'Remind me what's going to happen,' says Rosie, as though she can read Jay's mind. 'I don't mean the part nobody knows, I mean here.'

'Mel will give you a kiss, and I'll get on the bed and cuddle you for at least an hour. Me and Martha will give you a lovely wash and dress you in the clothes you chose: your pink-and-yellow top, and my garnet earrings, and your bracelets and your grey skinny jeans. You'll stay here for three days while I say prayers, so if your spirit can hear you'll feel comforted. They'll take you to the funeral home, where people can visit you to say goodbye. We'll put your teddies and your blankie in your coffin.'

Rosie doesn't comment, she's dozed off, she wakes up when Mel arrives.

He gives Jay a hug and kisses Rosa. She's lying with the bed almost flat, wearing a blue scarf round her hair. Her lips are as pale as if she's daubed them with that weird white lipstick girls used when he was a boy.

She lowers the mask. 'I told Mum to ring because she thinks I'm going to die today,'

He doesn't know what to say. He's not frightened of death. Not a lot frightens him, because fear is pointless, except.

'I love you, darlin. Is there anything you need?'

'I need to talk to you. While Mum does her sitting. But I keep dozing off. Can you and Mum help me to the loo?'

She's so weak. At least she's not skeletal. At least she can still smile. Once they've lifted her to the commode, he makes a cup of tea. From a teabag, but it perks him up. Rosa has a nap. He sits on the sofa. He's been at work most of the week. He has so many jobs to do at home. Washing, cleaning. Pay the paper bill. Jay hasn't mowed his grass since Easter.

'You'll be all right,' Rosa says.

She's looking at him. She shifts her hand in his direction. He puts his tea down so he can hold her hand between both of his.

‘Of course I will.’ How can she be thinking about him? His voice croaks.

‘You’ve got your job to worry about.’ She’s teasing him.

‘I love you. I’ll never forget you. I’ll always love you.’

‘Promise you’ll look after Mum?’

‘Course I will.’

Jay is an adult. Why does she need to be looked after any more than he does?

‘Promise.’

‘I promise.’

It’s OK to promise anything to someone who is dying. You make a promise so they feel better; when they’re gone they won’t know whether or not you keep it.

‘I don’t know if you’ll stay together.’ She sounds sad. ‘I’m gonna miss her birthday.’

A lump swells in his throat and tears pour down his cheeks. It is so wrong. All the birthdays she’ll miss: Mel’s birthday, her own birthday. All the Christmases.

‘I love you, Mel.’

He would do anything for her. He can do nothing. When she asks Jay to ring Martha because she’s desperate for a bath, he has an idea. Her paddling pool in the shed is too big for the sitting room.

The car feels like a furnace. He glides the window down and lights a Marlboro Light. He hasn’t had time to make roll-ups. He drives into town and parks in a disabled space near the Buttermarket. The disabled parking badge is on the shelf in Jay’s hall. Fuck it. The pedestrian precinct is still in shade. The Early Learning Centre only has family pools: rectangular, too big for indoors. Back to the Citroën. He drives down Handford Road and parks outside Argos. The tarmac smells hot. Snatches of normal conversations confuse him. Everyone is smiling more than usual because of the sudden hot weather. Women have opened out like flowers into skirts and flesh. The pools in the catalogue would be too big for the space next to Jay’s computer desk, or too small for Rosa to stretch her legs.

The car interior has overheated again even though he parked in the shade of a spindly tree. He lights a cigarette, opens both windows and heads up the

London road to Tesco. He asks an assistant. He wants to tell the woman, My daughter is dying of leukaemia and she needs a paddling pool to bathe in, as though his urgency might make the right pool materialise. He looks at the boxes, trying to make sense of them. The woman points out the display. The three-ring pool is perfect: high sides to hold enough water, diameter not too large. Only a fiver. He buys a foot pump for an extra fiver.

It must be the hottest day of the year because her mum is wearing a strappy top but Rosie feels cold. The tide is up to her shoulders. She floats and drowns till Mel gets back.

He walks in holding a massive cardboard box.

‘I’ve been all over, trying to get one that’s not too big.’

‘You’re a star,’ she says.

He looks pleased with himself.

She can’t believe how long it takes to get halfway across the room once Mel has blown up the pool and filled it with warm water and Martha’s arrived. She feels a bit shy but Mum says, ‘Don’t be embarrassed. Martha’s washed hundreds of adults, all shapes and sizes.’

‘It’s true, I used to be in general nursing.’

Rosie can’t hardly see where she is going. Everything’s getting dark and she feels confused whether it’s night-time.

She goes, ‘Sorry.’

‘Why don’t you let us wash you on the bed?’ asks Martha.

‘I want a bath.’

A bath is the only thing she wants.

They help her off with her PJs. She finally manages to sink down so she’s sitting in the water. It’s bliss. Like you’ve worked flat out for three months and you get an A* in your exam. Like you’ve fancied this boy all year and he kisses you, sweetly, outside the Pool Bar. The water is warm and soft and it covers her legs and laps around her waist. She can’t see it but she can feel it. She relaxes all over and it feels like she does a pee, which is disgusting but Mum rinses her with clean water from a bucket. The water trickles down her shoulders and back. It refreshes her soul.

Once she’s in bed, while Martha’s in the kitchen changing her syringe driver, she talks to her mum before it gets too hard to speak.

‘I’m glad I’m going. I’m not frightened any more. It’s got to be better than being ill all the time. It’s only that I don’t want to upset you and Mel.’

‘I love you to the end of time and back,’ says Mum. ‘I know you’ll be all right, because any love I have for you is what I’ve learned from the Buddhas and the universe. And from you, babes. Out there is thousands of times as much shining, beautiful love, just waiting for you.’

Martha reads to her from Winnie the Pooh and the Bible while Mum and Mel have a cup of tea in the garden. Rosie loves Martha. She’s seen it all before and she isn’t scared.

‘Pooh, when I’m—you know—when I’m not doing Nothing, will you come up here sometimes?’

‘Just Me?’

‘Yes, Pooh.’

‘Will you be here too?’

‘Yes, Pooh, I will be really. I promise I will be, Pooh.’

‘That’s good,’ said Pooh.

‘Pooh, promise you won’t forget about me, ever,’ she reads.

Mel and Jay drink tea in the garden. When he hugs Jay, he feels no tenderness or desire. They’ve been together eighteen years. She’ll always be his best friend but there’s nothing else left.

‘It’s so hot. I want to get our big paddling pool out,’ says Jay.

‘Good idea, love.’

The small pool is draped upside down over the washing line next to Rosa’s sheets. Bodies turn frail and leaky in the end. Blood, plasma, mucus, urine and faeces. Mel isn’t afraid of dying but he’d prefer to skip the bit where somebody has to wipe his bum. Rosa has somehow managed to maintain her dignity.

‘I keep wanting to talk about Rosie. About her life...memories. She brings out the best in me.’

He doesn’t reply. He doesn’t feel much like talking.

They take it in turns to sit with Rosa during the afternoon. Or they sit together on the settee while she lies almost flat under the blanket Jay bought her. A couple of times, she complains that her foot hurts. He and Jay shift the angle of the bed and place a pillow under her feet. She doesn’t wake again. Each

breath sounds like a massive effort. It's nearly over. He's in Kansas but somewhere in the world there are colour and music. Somewhere his real life is waiting.

Jay drinks tea with Mel in the summer garden, the orange blossom is out on the tree, birds are singing. When they hug he holds her in his arms and she can feel his body and his heart, she knows they'll love each other again and forever.

During the afternoon it seems as if Rosie's already on her way, leaving them. Jay and Mel read poems out loud and chat while she gets ready to set off wherever she's going, nobody knows where. During the afternoon, the sun blazes outside while shadows gather in the corners of the room, a trickle and gurgle sound in the shadows as though the brook that runs under the street has flooded, the sun blazes through the curtains all evening, it keeps the shadows at bay.

Jay goes to bed as the sun sets, she's so exhausted she sticks to the routine she and Rosie have been living in.

She kisses him like a zombie, trudges upstairs and shuts her bedroom door. Shuts him out. Rosa is no longer conscious. He can't remember her last words. He wants another cigarette but he won't leave her. He sits on the settee in the fading light for an hour. He listens to the bedtime calls of birds and then lies down on the bed settee. The patch of dry skin on his wrist itches. He tries not to scratch it. The oxygen extractors throb. Rosa's breath rasps. In. Out. Pause. Is that...? In.

He's starting to doze when she says something, a word he can't make out. He rolls from the bed to hold her hand. Her hand feels cold. He holds it gently. He wants to reassure her.

'You're safe, darlin'.'

She opens her eyes and looks into his. Her eyes are dark in the darkness of the room and yet he feels certain she sees him. Her breath stops. The pause extends too long. The life goes out of her eyes. It's the completion of a circle: he was the first to hold Rosa's tiny hand when she was born. He is the one to hold her hand while she dies.

My mum prays with me: deep peace of the running wave to you. Deep peace of the quiet earth to you. When all around is chaos and grief, clouded with

concern and pain, remember the one who loves you and look inside for deep peace that will bring healing gifts to you. Deep peace is always with you.

I'm on my way. Waves lift me away from the shore. Drifting into light and shade, I'm floating. Deep blue shadows on turquoise seawater.

When I open my eyes, it's dark. A snorting noise. I'm making the noise, gasping for air. I can hear Mel's voice but I can't see him.

'You're safe, darlin.'

He sounds frightened. And then I can't hear anything except the river rushing. The water is dark. Everything is dark.

He's holding my hand. He's holding on to me but I let go. And then the current takes me.

[The end]

‘Seventeen’: Ethics and Aesthetics

Thanks and praises for those who never invented anything
who never explored anything
who never mastered anything
but who give themselves up to the essence of each thing
ignorant of surfaces but possessed by the rhythm of things
indifferent to mastery but plunging into the chances of the
world [...]
Thanks and praises for joy
thanks and praises for love
thanks and praises for the rebirth of tears and the worst pain
brought back again
(Aimé Césaire).¹

4th March 2013: Last night I dreamed I was a woman in love with a younger man called Arnie, during the physically infatuated stage of an affair, kissing in doorways, experiencing yearning and desire. The dream setting shifted to some kind of factory ship; I’ve forgotten which industry was in operation. The woman could hear a pair of large, red, ragged claws, like crab claws, calling out to her, ‘Help! I’m Arnold——.’ Her companions remained oblivious to the voice of her former lover emanating from a component in the production process. The woman managed to communicate with the claws/Arnie but then found herself subjected to the same transmutation as Arnie had undergone: swept along, submerged in a piss-coloured, soupy stream that would transform her, by a method involving DNA dismantlement and rebuilding, into a pair of claws to be used in whatever industrial production it was.

This prologue may strike you as irrelevant to critical reflection on the novel I’m writing, except that its male protagonist’s full name is Arnold Melville (shortened to Mel). Perhaps the dream suggests unconscious mental processes concerned with the novel: a sense that the male protagonist is in trouble; or anxiety, as I begin to send the book out to agents, about the production and commodification process? Red in our culture tends to signify passion and danger; I associate it with desire. Could the dream be related to my writing of

¹ Free translation, based on translations by CLR James (1992 p302), and John Berger and Anna Bostock (Césaire 1969 pp75-85).

sexual encounters in this novel from the man's point of view rather than the woman's, because the adult woman's longings become so focused on her daughter's wellbeing and recovery?² I dream-sensed the strands of DNA being untangled, rather than demolished; perhaps the dream pertains to writing a reflective commentary, in which I should untangle the process of imagination and transformation involved in writing a novel. I have made at least four attempts to articulate critical reflection on my practice-led research, writing for weeks at a time without managing to integrate my awareness of the creative process with knowledge of its cultural context. Yesterday, re-reading Adrienne Rich's essay 'Disloyal to Civilisation,' I felt inspired by her phrase 'that synthesis of reflection and feeling, personal struggle and critical thinking' (1979, pp303-304).

I am not the only writer to experience such difficulty or disinclination. Kathy Acker notes, 'For weeks, months, now, I've been avoiding writing this: I have an almost uncontrollable desire not to talk about my writing'. Acker suggests that anything she wants to say about writing is part of her writing, so she doesn't need to comment; commentary would make the writing insufficient (1997, p6). Margaret Atwood, reflecting on composing a series of lectures, argues that 'writing itself is always bad enough, but writing about writing is surely worse, in the futility department. You don't even have the usual excuse of fiction – namely, that you are just making things up and therefore can't be held to any hard-and-fast standards of verisimilitude' (2002, pxvi). Jeannette Winterson, too, has voiced disquiet about critical reflection on her own fiction: 'To talk about my own work is difficult. If I must talk about it at all I would rather come at it sideways, through the work of writers I admire, through broader ideas about poetry and fiction and their place in the world' (1996, 165). Agreeing with Winterson, I will, during the course of this exegesis, refer to the work of writers I admire, and to broader ideas about realism, trauma fiction and fiction in general.

Maybe my problem involves the apprehension that I should be writing this in my own voice, as though I were a purely rational, centred subject both involved in and observing the process of creating a novel, which is not my

² Although the teenage girl does experience kissing.

experience. I suppose that's why I've begun this introduction with a dream; as Sigmund Freud deduced, logic and rational thought processes do not necessarily determine either those decisions and actions that are quotidian or those that have lasting consequences; the workings of another psychological system may be discerned in 'unconscious processes [that] only become cognizable by us under the conditions of dreaming and of neurosis' (1991, p160).

Introduction: Ethics and Aesthetics

At this point, it is necessary to sketch initial definitions of the terms ethics and aesthetics. I shall also outline the general structure of this critical commentary, and make some notes with regard to my approach to critical and theoretical sources. The main purpose of this critical reflection is to demonstrate how the issues, concerns and interests articulated in 'Seventeen' reflect cultural preoccupations, and to elucidate the relationship between the novel and its cultural context, expanding from the context of my own cultural production to the wider context of the novel in the UK and of trauma fiction in English or translated into English.

Ethics may be defined, concisely, as a set of moral principles governing or influencing conduct, and aesthetics as a set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty, especially in art, although I intend in the main to consider these principles as concerned with form rather than beauty. I need to enquire a bit further into these definitions, into cultural preoccupations with ethics and aesthetics and into their application to my work. Such an enquiry has already informed my practice-led research and its fruition in the shape of a novel at a profound level.

Ethics obviously forms a focus of attention for the culture of literary studies: references to 'the ethical turn' in criticism and theory appear ubiquitous; to offer only a couple of examples, an eminent critic whose valuable introduction to literary theory was first published in 1983, in 2008 authored a study of ethics;³

³ Terry Eagleton's *Trouble with Strangers* helps me to draw, and to some extent to blur, a distinction between ethics and politics that has occupied my thoughts in the course of composing this critical reflection: 'there is no hard-and-fast distinction here between the ethical-Real and the political-symbolic';³ 'it is not that ethics deals with neighbours whereas politics deals with strangers' (2008, p321, p324). Before I read his arguments, I had made a simple differentiation that assumed politics to be concerned with power, status and governance, while ethics concerned

while an eminent theorist whose thought in the 1970s addressed such issues as the common assumptions of structuralism and phenomenology regarding a metaphysics of presence, during the 1990s authored a volume that insists on the relevance of ethics, albeit an ethics that is spectral or virtual rather than pragmatic.⁴ My thinking on ethics in relation to writing, and to knowledge validation systems, has been influenced by writers such as Patricia Hill Collins. Collins propounds an alternative epistemology to those based on domination, universality and hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality and class; in it she proposes that personal experience, the use of dialogue rather than adversarial debate, the ethics of caring and personal accountability should validate knowledge.⁵

Accordingly, I assert that personal experience has informed my knowledge of ethics. Becoming a parent comprised the most important ethical shift in my life with regard to attending to the rights and needs of another person, different from me and more vulnerable. Maternal instincts constitute the pattern for of ethical feeling and behaviour in some systems of thought, for instance Theravadan Buddhism: ‘just as a mother, with all her life, / protects her only child and keeps it safe, / you need to cultivate for all beings and the entire world/ a boundlessly loving heart’.⁶ I am aware of the irony, since the mother in ‘Seventeen’ is unable to protect her only child and keep it safe. I’m also aware that this is not a generally-accepted benefit: referring to Adrienne Rich and Susan Griffin, Ntozake Shange remarks that ‘the mothers know that it’s a dreadful proposition to give up one’s life for one’s family and one’s mate and, therefore, lose oneself in the process of caring and tending for others’ (in Tate 1985, p162). The assumption here is that a mother loses herself rather than finds herself in caring for others—which reflects the value accorded in our culture to caring (in comparison, for instance, with accumulating wealth or winning international athletics competitions). Probably this ethical dilemma forms one of

itself with justice, respect and value. However, political action may connect itself with justice and respect, while most religions also address ethical issues of how people live together in addition to spiritual instruction on how to live with the self—together with, in some cases, an unverified God or gods.

⁴ See Derrida 1976, 1994.

⁵ *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1991), Routledge, London.

⁶ Anonymous translation from the Pali Metta Sutta (which is attributed to the Buddha).

the themes of ‘Seventeen’: how much of their ‘own lives’ do the stepfather and mother give up or retain while caring for a gravely ill child? I have certainly discussed issues around representation of the gender of the parent who renounces paid work (and its ensuing benefits, such as a pension) with the main carer for a child who suffers from severe sickle cell anaemia.

The other area which I want to invoke in this introduction is the responsibility of writing as agency. Ethics implies agency in the writer; writing can affect behaviour.⁷ I have tried to use my powers as a writer in the cause of justice—in limited and modest ways.⁸ As a filmmaker in my twenties, I prioritised responsibility to the community in which I lived above my self-development as an artist: I chose to participate in establishing a production company in the form of a co-operative, with professional responsibilities for representing the views of others and helping others to present their own points of view in one of the most deprived areas of the UK, over an offer to study for an MA, which seemed like retreat to an ivory tower. As the mother of a child with medical disabilities, I prioritised care for my daughter over the development of my career. I am not asserting that these are necessarily the right choices, or the correct ethical choices, but simply that a set of moral principles concerned with awareness of privilege and relationships to others was involved in my decision making.

At this stage in my life I am focusing all my concentration on my self-development as a writer. What I have to offer the world, I offer as a writer. As Maya Angelou asserts, ‘my responsibility as a writer is to be as good as I can be at my craft. So I study my craft [...] first, I’m always trying to be a better human being, and second, I continue to learn my craft’ (in Tate 1985, p5). The novel I’m engaged in composing has no purpose; I am simply trying to make it as excellent as I can in terms of its form, characters and voices. But the idea of writing as agency implies ethical responsibility, and here the ideas of other writers inspire and inform my thinking. Ursula Le Guin, for example, criticises best-selling works that aim to make the reader feel good, that indulge in wishful thinking and

⁷ As I became aware when I joined Amnesty International after reading the testimony of Rigoberta Menchú.

⁸ For instance composing a letter of protest at the exclusion of a Black pupil from secondary school after an incident which resulted in only remonstrance with, and detention for, the White pupils involved.

deny pain, failure and death, while also decrying novels of despair that are simply cathartic. ‘When art shows only how and what, it is trivial entertainment, whether optimistic or despairing. When it asks why, it rises from mere emotional response to real statement, and to intelligent ethical choice. It becomes, not a passive reflection, but an act’ (1979, pp218-219). I know that my published novel *Make It Back* (2009) tried to ask why, but I don’t know whether ‘*Seventeen*’ asks why.

Before I turn to the topic of aesthetics, I want to summarise the most vital change I’ve made to ‘*Seventeen*’ due to ethical considerations. The stepfather, Mel, was from the first draft written as a character with one hand different from the other:

Straight people tend to ignore Mel’s left hand, which is barely more than a wrist with fingers that appear on the verge of sprouting and a small, round thumb that has a tiny nail. They fail to mention it, as though it strikes them as unacceptable, or too repellent or vestigial to merit observation. When they do refer to it they say he only has one hand, as if his left hand is so inadequate that it has no existence whatsoever (10th draft, p35)

I felt able to imagine this character because of my familiarity with a friend who has a different hand; he doesn’t conceive of himself as disabled because the difference doesn’t prevent him from performing any action except plaiting hair or grinding pepper with a certain type of pepper grinder, neither of which are essential to his existence. Perhaps naïvely, I surmised that this person would approve of a novel in which the protagonist had a hand as different as his own. I sent the tenth draft for him to read, whereupon he raised strong objections on the grounds that readers would believe the character to be him. He did not couch his opposition to my representation in terms of the slightest implausibility or lack of conviction in the behaviour, thoughts or speech of the character, but purely in terms of feeling exposed. For one example, Mel is described as smoking cannabis (p176, 10th draft), which is illegal; my friend was averse to people believing that he indulged in an illegal activity.

I might have countered my friend’s objections with reassurances as to the unlikelihood of the novel’s being published or, if it were to be published, being read by more than a few hundred people. I could have argued that I had imagined and written so many differences between his own behaviour and circumstances

and Mel's that no-one who knew him could conflate the real person with the character. But it seemed ethical to receive his objections seriously.

I discussed the situation with a group of friends and acquaintances, one of whom happened to hold a senior research post in ethics in the discipline of Medical Humanities. She asked whether I considered the novel finished, and when I answered that I did, recommended that I stay true to my artistic vision, since after all that was paramount and it hardly mattered if a single person felt outraged, exposed or betrayed. Although I was interested to hear the opinions and suggestions of men and women who range in age from their twenties to their sixties, I knew I must decide my own course of action. The work of artists such as Sophie Calle, who calls into question boundaries between art and life, public and private, interests and sometimes amuses me, but I believe there remains an ethical difference between self-exposure and intrusion into someone else's privacy. I do not write to anger or expose anyone (unless they should object to my writing on the grounds of their own sexism, racism or bigotry), particularly a friend. When I write from the point of view of someone different from myself, I'm trying to imagine and respect the character's existence rather than denigrate behaviour or views I might not espouse myself. Above all, I value kindness: 'before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,/ you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing / [...] / Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore'.⁹ Holding these views, my course was clear: I changed the character. In the eleventh draft, Mel has red hair and the usual, boring kind of hands with four fingers and one thumb each; he grew up in Shoreham, not Sheffield.

Although this alteration was made for ethical reasons, I can't help speculating that it may have benefited the novel's coherence. As one of my supervisors observed, any character with a marked disability tends to be subject to 'signification overload' because of traditions in fiction according to which disability figures various moral, existential or hermeneutic dilemmas, failings or insights. Ato Quayson in *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the crisis of Representation* (2007) enquires into the genealogy of disability representation and teases out its salient categories with regard to this overdetermination. Mel as

⁹ Naomi Shihab Nye, 'Kindness' in Astley 2004, p304.

a character categorised by others as possessing a marked physical difference could have distracted from the centrality of Rosie's predicament.

The ethical dilemma recounted above epitomises the struggle between truth and kindness in relation to form and poetics that I believe underlies the writing of this novel, 'Seventeen'. Perhaps another example may be useful. In relation to the form of the novel, the tension between these elements assumes a triangular traction, for instance when prescriptions for plot and suspense strain against the disappointments and tediousness of lived experience. I want the reader to find 'Seventeen' engrossing. How do I make a novel engaging? I'll give an example of a plot-based, best-selling novel, in this case a thriller or detective fiction, that I believe illustrates answers to the questions: who would be the most irresistible protagonist? What event would most engage the reader's sympathies? What would be the most horrific threat to human kind that the protagonist could avert? The author of *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* (Høeg 1993) creates an unconventional, cynical female character, from an ethnic minority, who has never experienced love. The precipitating event of the novel is the death of an innocent child. The universal danger the protagonist averts involves a parasitical worm that destroys its host's vital organs. With respect to the skill of the writing, the project strikes me as unethical and exploitative in relation to truth and kindness, although admirably successful with regard to earning a living for novelist, publishers and agents.

Such allusions to ethics and values suggest that conduct is always rational and intentional. I shall return later to irrational, unintended behaviour on the part of my characters. For now I simply want to refer again to my dream in which the male protagonist was in trouble. In the light of subsequent challenges, does the dream suggest knowledge held in my unconscious because it was unacceptable to my consciousness? 'A sense that the male protagonist is in trouble or anxiety' lingered as a vague feeling after I woke up.

Do these ethical considerations have any connection with the nature and appreciation of beauty? If I talk about ethics and aesthetics, I'm proposing that the novel is an aesthetic object with formal concerns. The term aesthetics implies value judgements with regard to form, just as ethics implies value judgements pertaining to conduct. Any discussion of ethics and aesthetics in British writing must be haunted by Keats' totalising maxim: "Beauty is truth, truth

beauty,”—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know,’¹⁰ which I understand to contradict the enduring Taoist aphorism: ‘Truthful words aren’t beautiful,/Beautiful words aren’t true’.¹¹ One of the choices I need to consider is whether I have been aiming for truth, beauty or both.

Terry Eagleton connects the concept of aesthetics in literature to ‘the very alienation of art from social life’ in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, and its separation from material practices and ideological meanings (1996, pp18-19): art for its own sake. Joanna Russ, in a chapter on ‘Aesthetics,’ ruminates on the canon of literature, on centres of value and on what makes great writing, comparing, for one example, Virginia Woolf with Zora Neale Hurston (1984, pp110-121). Above, I declared that I have been trying to make my novel as excellent as possible; a corollary to this statement is precisely the application of value judgements as to excellence. In the course of this exegesis I shall attempt to clarify the judgements I’ve made about language, form and aesthetics.

The first chapter considers the form or genre of the novel I’ve chosen to write. I shall explore twentieth-century writers’ aspirations towards fictional truth and representations of reality, largely ignoring such critical divisions as those between categories of modernism and postmodernism because I am trying to present the concerns that have informed ‘Seventeen’ rather than demonstrate a complete knowledge of literary criticism. I attempt to place this novel in the context of my own development as a writer, and then to discuss how I have deployed features specific to a poetics of fiction, together with rhetorical strategies, to attempt to provide an illusion of reality for the reader. The chapter ends with a summary of changes made during the editing process according to conclusions reached during my reading around realism.

The second chapter looks at ‘Seventeen’ in relation to aesthetics and ethics within a category of fiction formed more recently: trauma fiction. It attempts to review how symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder have been aligned by cultural and literary critics with aesthetic features in writing trauma, and to consider whether I’ve adopted such elements in ‘Seventeen’. It moves on to recognise ethical questions regarding identification with and imagination or appropriation of points of view other than my own. This chapter revisits some of

¹⁰ From the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ (st5 1913, p52).

¹¹ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, 1963, p143 (ch81).

the categories under discussion in the first chapter, including voice and character, time, place and rhetorical figures that include repetition, metaphor and metonymy; this reduplication accords with the foci of my practice. The writing of the novel has led the research project, often intuitively, and during the process of critical reflection on the writing I have considered elements of its poetics in relation to cultural preoccupations with ethics and aesthetics: the structure of my exegesis reflects this process.

My critical reflection consists of exploration rather than reasoned argument in support of a logical thesis. In terms of references to critical and theoretical sources, I have not adopted any particular critical stance. As part of a practice-led study in Creative Writing, it makes use of literary terms related to poetics and rhetoric. Concepts and terms from narratology, in particular those pertinent to point of view and character, have proved consistently useful: for example Gérard Genette's term 'focalisation,' which is used for a mediation of third-person narration that gives the point of view, thoughts and feelings of a character (Rimmon-Kenan 1999, 71-85). Reading undertaken specifically for this research has consisted to a large extent either of practical background material (relating to teenage interests and studies, to cinema in the period 2004-6 or to the psychology of terminally-ill children, for example) or of studies around novel-writing and trauma fiction. I continue to find engaging and inspiring those reflections on writing made by novelists whose work interests me. I have not aimed at a comprehensive knowledge of 'the twenty-first-century novel' or 'trauma fiction;' my area of expertise, in this instance, consists of the novel 'Seventeen'.

I have also cited theorists and critics whose work seems relevant to my considerations, including Sigmund Freud, and, more occasionally, Julia Kristeva, bell hooks and others. Having read their work in the past, I am conscious that their thinking has affected the composition of my novel; I have attempted, here and there, to elucidate such influences. Again, I do not pretend to possess insights that expand on or respond to their work. I would argue that a correct interpretation is not necessary in order to stimulate imagination and creativity (and also that even the most eminent theorists occasionally misinterpret the texts they address).

At this point, before I plunge into discussions of ‘Seventeen’ in relation to form and ethics, I need to include a few observations on aesthetics within the content of the novel.

A Note on Beauty in the Content of the Novel

I particularly wanted to write a protagonist with a physical disability as a sexually attractive character in contrast to his literary predecessors such as Ricky in *The Longest Journey* (1907) by EM Forster. In the completed novel Rosie has medical disabilities and ‘exist[s] within the full range of human emotions, contradictions, hopes, fears, and vague ideas, just like any other character,’ ie ‘disability as normality’ according to a typology of disability representations mapped by Quayson (2007, pp51-52). My intention was to create Mel as an equally complex character. As outlined above, ethical considerations made me relinquish this particular desire in this instance, although I am aware that tensions around notions of normality and abnormality still pervade ‘Seventeen’.

But further, a consideration of categories of beauty as content, rather than form, in ‘Seventeen’ forces the recognition that its aesthetics is haunted by the racialising binary Black/White¹². Victoria Burrows, in *Whiteness and Trauma: the Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison* (2004), examines ‘white metaphor signified as trauma’ (p56). She notes in Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) ‘racial abhorrence aimed at mixed-race hybrid characters’ (Burrows 2004, p51), ‘sexual and racial abjection’ (p53), and the ‘physically repulsive [...] polluted outcome of miscegenation’ (p57), without, perhaps, paying enough attention to the repulsiveness attached to words such as ‘racial’ or ‘miscegenation’. A cursory application to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Tenth Edition) (1999) reveals that ‘racial’ means ‘of or relating to a race’ or ‘to relations or differences between races’. Under the entry for ‘race,’ a note on usage explains that deployment of the word has become problematic, while the first meaning attached to ‘racism’ is given as ‘the belief that there are characteristics, abilities or qualities specific to each race’. Sometimes, therefore, where Burrows uses ‘racial,’ I would tend to use ‘racist’: eg ‘racist abhorrence aimed at mixed-race characters’.

¹² I use capital letters because these racialised terms constitute political adjectives (like British or French) rather than literal descriptions (such as tall or brown eyed).

In 'Seventeen,' the teenage protagonist, Rosie, displays her awareness of this historically-specific prejudice with its script and rehearsals in North Atlantic slavery and European imperialism when she opines that 'her mother was irresponsible to have a baby who wasn't black or white and didn't have a proper father' (11th draft, p22). Rosie's biological father, Isaac, hardly appears in the novel. I wrote Jay as remembering Isaac's fat belly—with fat surfacing in twenty-first-century European culture as a sexually undesirable characteristic—precisely to avoid the aestheticisation and sexualisation of Black men and women traced, for instance, by Sander L Gilman from Europe in the Middle Ages to late-nineteenth-century art, medicine and literature (1986, pp223-261)¹³. In a further repudiation of the prurient sexual curiosity which labelled 'Kung women's visible labia minora as abnormal, as 'the Hottentot apron,' I have endowed Jay, a White European woman, with remarkably long, dark labia. Later, recalling the prejudice against mixing what have been labelled separate races, I changed the sentence, 'Jay didn't mean to get pregnant, she might feel ashamed but how could she ever be ashamed of Rosie?' (7th draft, p56) to 'Jay didn't mean to get pregnant, she might feel ashamed of her own lack of loyalty and responsibility but how could she ever be ashamed of Rosie?' (8th, p54). The second, although it may be clumsier, avoids misinterpretation.

Although Burrows attends to the metaphors of the maroon and the zombie in Rhys' work and to the synecdoche of the daffodil in Jamaica Kincaid's, she adopts the synecdoche of skin colour without examination: 'naked or not, it is the colour of a person's skin which to a large extent positions every body in the social system of constitutive meaning' (2004, p5). In this prevalent synecdoche, or catachresis, skin pigmentation is understood as signifying race: Black or White. Jayne O Ifekwunigwe argues clearly that biracialisation—assignment of human beings to distinct categories of races—is a social and historical process with no basis in biological science (1999, pp10-16). It becomes obvious that 'skin colour' is merely a figure of speech if we attempt to assign two individuals with identical skin to racialised categories: both have skin the colour of Americano coffee with a dash of milk; one has straight fair hair, grey eyes, a nose that juts away from their cheeks and thin lips; the other has

¹³ See also Fanon 1986, pp63-82.

dark, curly hair, brown eyes and a nose that blends into their cheeks. Would we categorise them together? If division of human beings into separate races persists only as a ‘popular folk concept’ to define people with ‘complex specific transnational histories, and social, cultural, and political dynamics’ (Ifekwunigwe 1999, p17), should I, as a novelist, abandon such categories entirely? To simplify answers to that question generously supplied by participants in a conference on ‘Time and Space in Contemporary Women’s Writing,’¹⁴ I need to continue to make explicit the racialised category to which a protagonist would be assigned because otherwise a majority of readers (European readers? White readers?) will assume that protagonist to be White, and also because, as Toni Morrison asserts, we continue to live in a ‘genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world’ (1993, p4).

In ‘Seventeen,’ Rosie, having grown up in a White family, identifies with Black people at the African-Caribbean Leukaemia Foundation ball; she identifies with ‘people with smooth noses, black hair, brown eyes and rounded bottoms,’ rather than ‘those who have smooth hair, beaky noses and flat arses’ (11th draft, p63): no mention of skin colour at all. I based this perception on my daughter’s description of her feelings; she in turn may have omitted skin colour as a signifier in response to my own habit of attempting to avoid common linguistic strategies that obviate the need for ‘specificity, accuracy, or even narratively useful description’ (Morrison 1993, p67)—such as the economy of stereotype when a White person interrupts a description of a woman of rather short stature, with cropped black hair and pronounced cheekbones, who works as a lecturer at the local FE college, to check, ‘You mean that Black lady?’

Formed by a culture obsessed with surfaces and appearances, all three of my protagonists are aware to a greater or lesser extent of physical beauty, but their aesthetic awareness fades as the narrative reaches its conclusion. Superficial beauty is often conjoined with public media in the novel, as when Rosie slashes the faces of models and movie stars after receiving her terminal prognosis (11th draft, p167). Two thirds of the way through, Mel notices Rosie’s looks: ‘She is so beautiful, even in her hideous brown jumper over jeans. Film-star beautiful, although she resembles no actor he can think of; stars such as

¹⁴ University of Hull, 8-9 September 2011.

Dorothy Dandridge had more European features' (p188); his observations combine an apprehension of physical beauty with the other kind of beauty in the book, which stems from love. They also materialise the fading White ghost of racist divisions. In the final chapter, in which Rosie dies, she perceives her mother's face as both sagging and beautiful (p301), while Jay, opening the curtains, perceives 'the most beautiful day' (p303) because she is striving to force what is happening into some kind of loveliness in order to protect her child from horror.

These notes pertain to aesthetics in the content of 'Seventeen' as opposed to its form or style. The remainder of this critical reflection will focus on aesthetics as judgements made regarding its narration, appropriate form and rhetorical techniques, together with ethical questions that relate to truth and imagination. I shall begin with an exploration of the writing of 'Seventeen' and strategies employed to induce conviction in the reader.

Writing a novel in the 21st Century

I set out to write a novel that would articulate as honestly as possible the experiences of a family whose child has leukaemia, including unconscious as well as conscious mental processes and motivations. My aim was formed intuitively, in opposition to other novels I had read, which failed to convince me as articulations of what this experience is like. Reception of a draft as realist fiction prompted me to enquire about distinctions between realism and other fictional modes; about strategies I have employed in an attempt to induce conviction in a reader; and—conversely, perhaps—about my recognition that the novel consists of text that refers to and argues with other texts. In Toni Morrison's cogent observation, 'I only have twenty-six letters of the alphabet' (in Tate 1985, p120). The ability of certain writers to order and rearrange these twenty-six letters to interpret or create worlds continues to astound and inspire me.

The first sections of this chapter consist of a brief exploration of the ideas of writers who have aimed to create an illusion of reality; I'll try to detail implications for 'Seventeen' of the process of reflection and feeling, personal struggle and critical analysis towards the end. I'm aware that the chapter is riven by a division between the way I read and compose initially, on the one hand, and my ideal of critical analysis on the other. The first tends towards synthesis rather than analysis, putting ideas and observations together in a continual present that results in playfulness and anachronism. The second is more rigorous and disciplined; it aspires towards 'historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis'.¹⁵ The present exegesis falls far short of my ideal; I'm merely attempting to indicate the conflicting forces that tug this reflection in opposite directions.

¹⁵ In cultural materialist criticism, 'historical context undermines the transcendent significance traditionally accorded to the literary text and allows us to recover its histories'; theoretical method replaces criticism that tries only to discover some kind of essential meaning; socialist, feminist [and anti-imperialist] commitment avoids uncritical attitudes to author, traditional canon, and theories that focus so closely on language and minutiae that power relations in the world are obscured; and textual analysis pays attention to the words on the page (Dollimore and Sinfield 1985, Foreword).

The notion of realism in novels pertains both to a particular eighteenth-century impetus that developed into the nineteenth-century movement which includes Austen and Eliot in England, Balzac and Stendhal in France and Turgenev and Tolstoy in Russia, and also, in general, to the convincing and plausible literary representation of human life through various historical periods, from the picaresque narratives of sixteenth-century Spain to recent publications in myriad languages across the globe (Furst 1992, Walder 2006, Watt 1966). I have remarked that even those assessing the realist novel hesitate to suggest a definition. In Walder's introductory volume about the genre, Pam Morris summarises the novel's 'portrayal of individualized characters in a specific geographical and historical world,' in which each character remains recognisable through time as an identity of consciousness and yet changes over time in the course of interactions with his or her world (Walder 2006, p31). Cornell scholar MH Abrams distinguishes between realistic fiction, said to represent 'life as it actually is,' and romantic fiction, purported to present 'life as we would have it be'. However, he suggests that a more useful and adequate definition relates to the effect on the reader: realist novelists 'must render their materials in ways that make them seem to their readers the very stuff of ordinary experience' (1993, p174).

Realism, a literary mode that attempts to convey ordinary experiences, obviously needs to be distinguished from 'reality,' itself a term subject to debate in various sciences, mathematics, critical theory, philosophy and epistemology. I'll supply myself with a brief working definition that interprets reality as things as they actually are, the state of existence, the world as it is actually experienced. Realising that an attempt to define such terms as 'realism,' 'reality,' 'experience' and 'truth' could occupy an entire chapter, I intend to plunge immediately into enquiry as to the thoughts of novelists and critics on the topic, beginning with the twentieth century. It will become necessary for me to assess whether 'truth' remains a valid concept. I want to place 'Seventeen' in the context of my continuing creative practice. I will reflect on how 'Seventeen' approaches the poetics of fictional realism in terms of basic categories of characterisation, time, place and the use of metaphor and metonymy, before concluding with a few remarks about the influence of my reading on subsequent drafts of the novel.

‘Life or Spirit, Truth or Reality’

EM Forster, considering *Aspects of the Novel* in 1927, rejects periodisation in order to imagine all the English novelists seated together in ‘a circular room, a sort of British Museum reading-room –all writing their novels simultaneously’ (1987, p27). The image appeals to me because I don’t read novels according to an historical ordering of their authors’ lives, and also because the tenses in which they write are not altered by the passage of time (which affords one reason why I tend to use the present tense for quotations). Forster defines the novel as ‘any fictitious prose work over 50,000 words’; he does not define realism; however, he does pay attention to attempts to translate truth from life into books, and also draws a distinction between novelists who propose, ‘Here is something that might occur in your lives,’ and those who ask their readers to accept something that could not possibly occur: he includes Laurence Sterne, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and DH Lawrence in the second group (pp102-103).

Virginia Woolf, too, imagines a visit to a circular room in the British Museum: ‘The swing-doors swung open; and there one stood under the vast dome, as if one were a thought in the huge bald forehead which is so splendidly encircled by a band of famous names’; Woolf in 1928 casts gentle ridicule on the British Museum reading room as a repository for patriarchal culture (1945, p28). A few years earlier she had pictured contemporary writers of fiction standing on flat ground, ‘in the crowd, half-blind with dust,’ looking back at their predecessors without any vantage point to enhance their view (1984, p157). The distinction Woolf makes is neither between realism and modernism nor between plausibility and fantasy, but between those who write of inessential matters and those who manage to convey something important: ‘Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide’. It seems that Woolf is striving after verisimilitude in a different form, casting aside worn-out conventions that include plot, love interest and catastrophe as well as genres such as comedy or tragedy (1984, p160).

I read Woolf’s 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* as something that might occur, that convinces me as an articulation of what it’s like to be alive in Britain in the 1920s. *The Waves* (1931), however, although it contains nothing that could

not possibly occur, announces itself to me as artifice rather than life because of its marked emphasis on form and ideas: repeated lines of speech, for instance, near the beginning; and an increasing lack of distinction between the voices of the different characters. It seems that there is a tipping point between writing that can stimulate my imagination to treat it as reality and writing that strikes me as pure artifice; this is neither a value judgement nor any kind of definitive remark on *The Waves*, but purely a personal observation that clarifies my aims with regard to ‘Seventeen’.

In the seventh chapter of a third draft of ‘Seventeen’ I arranged passages focalised through Rosie in an X on the page (because she was suffering from radiation sickness; see Appendix A), but awareness of this tipping point caused me to return to a more conventional layout. Like Woolf, I want to write about life and spirit, truth and reality.¹⁶ My novel, although it centres on the catastrophe of a leukaemia diagnosis, aims to avoid conventions of comedy, tragedy and plot. As for love interest, it aims to tell truths about love that alters lives altogether; that bears more relation to Tanya Stephens singing, ‘This is love, though you get on my nerves,’¹⁷ than to a romantic quest that begins as attraction or aversion, faces various obstacles and concludes with marriage.

‘Life or spirit, truth or reality’: a writer as precise as Woolf appears vague about the essential thing to be conveyed in fiction in 1927, but she omits any mention of beauty. Woolf reads with approval, in James Joyce’s novels, ‘the attempt to come closer to life’ (1984, p161). Joyce himself, in 1900, at the age of seventeen or eighteen, gave an address to members of University College, Dublin, in which he asserted that ‘beauty is the swerga of the aesthete; but truth has a more ascertainable and more real dominion. Art is true to itself when it deals with truth’ (quoted by Jeri Johnson in her introduction to *Dubliners*, Joyce 2002, pviii).¹⁸

¹⁶ At the same time, I fear that referring to my own prose in the same sentence as that of a writer of such enduring significance may constitute hubris; I find it more comforting to think of novelists who developed slowly, such as Hilary Mantel or Anne Tyler, than of Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) in seven weeks, or Marilynne Robinson, whose first published novel was the extraordinary, seminal *Housekeeping* (1980).

¹⁷ ‘This Is Love’ on the album *Gangsta Blues* (2004).

¹⁸ I noted this quotation, during the first year of research for my project, because I admire so many of the stories in *Dubliners* (1914). I enjoy Joyce’s use of language and recognise some of his characters, who seem real to me. When I found the quotation, I had to research it because I

I imagine that a fair number of those novelists assembled by Forster in the British Museum Reading Room to compose their novels simultaneously—using quill pens, fountain pens, typewriters or laptops—are concerned with truth. Here is Joseph Conrad, for instance:

The problem was to make unfamiliar things credible. To do that I had to [...] envelop them in their proper atmosphere of actuality. This was the hardest task of all and the most important, in view of that conscientious rendering of truth in thought and fact which has always been my aim (in Allott 1973, p55).

His project and technique intend to convince the reader of the truth as he perceives it. I shall return below to the use of techniques for creating a ‘proper atmosphere of actuality’. Ford Madox Ford, when commissioned to write about literary impressionism, discussed matters of intention as well as craft and technique with Conrad; he concluded that the novelist’s aim was ‘to produce an illusion of reality in the mind of one’s reader’ (1995, p265). Another novelist, BS Johnson, whom I picture sitting at the same table as Conrad and Ford, his Brylcreemed quiff, woolly jumper and expert typing contrasting with their stiff collars, ties and first-draft ink scrawls, rejects the role of storyteller and states that he has no interest in telling lies in his novels; he distinguishes between literature and other writing on the grounds that literature ‘teaches one something true about life: and how can you convey truth in a vehicle of fiction?’ (in Bradbury 1977, p154). Johnson in 1973 advocates the evolution of forms to suit continual changes in reality.

This interests and engages me: this question of truth in relation to form. One of the motives that have impelled me to write, revise and complete this particular novel is the disparity between fiction that elaborates the stories of girls with leukaemia and my experience and imagination-of-the-truth-for-a-particular-family. Reading, I find it easier to recognise truth in the particular than in attempts to universalise, so under no circumstances would I aim to write a novel of universal significance. Which brings me back to the historical conditions of my writing: Europe in the twenty-first century. Perhaps I need to find an exit from the circular reading room where all the novelists sit together composing

thought I must have scribbled ‘swerga’ down wrong, but it appears that swerga means terrestrial paradise in that ancient religion known to Europeans as Hinduism.

their (our) work and take a brief detour into the historical conditions of its composition: a breath of fresh air?

Truth and Circumstance

The question of dominant truths is intimately entwined with literary forms and structures. The entire project of European realism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may be attributed to the rise of a literate, leisured bourgeoisie, conceiving of themselves as autonomous individuals in a system of industrial capitalism (eg Watt 1966, pp62-63). It has also been considered as an effect of European imperialism: ‘without empire [...] there is no European novel as we know it’. Edward Said, in the 1990s, casts realism as a form whose regulatory social power and consolidation of authority paralleled the expansive, regulatory authority and power of the British Empire (1994, pp73-95). He goes on to attribute modernist literary techniques employed by Joyce, Conrad, Proust, Eliot, Pound and Woolf to the necessity of developing ‘a new encyclopaedic form’ to replace synthesis and consolidation. As the empire struck back, asserting its presence, history and resistance within the dark fortress of Europe, Said notices three features of a new aesthetic: ‘a circularity of structure, inclusive and open at the same time’; textual references to and revisions of a museum of disparate cultural fragments; and ‘the irony of a form that draws attention to itself as substituting art and its creations for the once-possible synthesis of the world empires’ (p229). He argues that the evolution of literary forms is related to the rise and fall of European empires.

Analyses of colonial discourse are normally applied to texts whose production preceded the 1914-18 war, while postcolonial studies tend to focus on those issued after 1945 and the intense struggle for decolonisation. However, Howard J Booth and Nigel Rigby, in their introduction to a collection of essays on Modernism and Empire (2000), emphasise the connection between British colonialism and literature during the intervening period:

The years after the First World War saw the land occupied by the British Empire reach its maximum. Dissemination among the various colonising and colonised populations of the discourse that supported colonialism were also at their most extensive: the Empire was bolstered through new media, imperial ideas were stressed in schools, Empire Day

was introduced, and millions went to see colonial exhibitions (2000, 2-3).

Perhaps ‘truth’ had a different meaning during the heyday of the British Empire. Woolf, of course, certainly questioned empire and dominant truths.¹⁹ And here I find myself, a citizen of a former imperial power—having had the power to vote since the age of twenty-one, a right granted to women in 1928—rather confused about this notion of truth.

Because on the one hand my reading informs me that a furore around the status of truth erupted during the 1980s, after decades of decolonisation, struggles for Civil Rights, and feminist resistance to oppression and disregard, while on the other my reading informs me that those whose points of view have been misrepresented have persisted for centuries in scepticism about truth claims that conflict with their experiences. I’ll provide a couple of examples to demonstrate what I mean. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon places squarely in the foreground, as the guiding interest of her book, ‘the problematizing of history by postmodernism’:

issues such as those of narrative form, of intertextuality, of strategies of representation, of the role of language, of the relation between historical fact and experiential event, and, in general, of the epistemological and ontological consequences of rendering problematic that which was once taken for granted by historiography—and literature (pxii).

Another assertion that this kind of scepticism is innovative can be found in the introduction to Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob’s *Telling the Truth about History* (1995), which announces, ‘once there was a single narrative of national history that most Americans accepted as part of their heritage’ (p3). Both of these examples, one written by a Canadian literary critic and theorist and the other by three American historians, assert that there existed an accord about the status of language and truth which was subsequently called into question.

However, examples immediately spring to mind that appear to contradict such a thesis. I’ll provide a couple of instances as evidence. Catherine Morland, the ignorant seventeen-year-old protagonist of *Northanger Abbey* (1818), complains that history

¹⁹ For example in *Three Guineas* (1938).

tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all – it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention. The speeches that are put into the heroes' mouths, their thoughts and designs – the chief of all this must be invention, and invention is what delights me in other books (2010, pp95-96).

Catherine's scepticism towards the truth claims of history anticipates the focus on narrative forms, strategies of representation, the role of language and doubts regarding historical facts that pervaded academia during the 1980s and 90s. In another example, Sojourner Truth, a former slave, who chose her own name, spoke at a convention on women's rights in Ohio in 1851; one record of her speech includes the following scepticism towards master narratives:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

[....] Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.²⁰

Records of Sojourner Truth's influential speech, which is not fiction, vary, yet all have in common the rejection of dominant definitions of femininity that fail to accord with the lived experiences of enslaved women. These instances, in contrast with those cited in the last paragraph, would seem to contradict the idea of the general acceptance of previous presumptions about historiography and narrative truth.

²⁰ Sojourner Truth, 'Ain't I a Woman?' Women's Convention, Akron, Ohio, 28-29 May 1851. <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/E151FA9D-6017-4556-981F-CD076D731A72/0/SecondaryTextGuideAnswerKeyAintWoman.pdf> 12.03.2013

Catherine's naïve observations ring true; truth is not divided from invention by an insurmountable barrier: although I claim that I want my novel to tell the truth, I'm aware that I'm inventing three different centres of consciousness, who do not all experience events—which could be understood as having objective existence—in the same way.

Such awareness is distinct from jettisoning any preoccupation with truth or referentiality. Julie Scanlon notes postmodernist critical assessments of realist modes as reactionary, dogmatic and inducing passive consumption, while postmodernist fiction is seen as challenging and redemptive; enjoyment of realist linear stories is understood as 'old-fashioned, uncritical, untrendy, naïve, and even embarrassing' (2008, p88). Jeannette Winterson comments with scathing dismissal on British fiction during the 1940s and 1950s, 'in my terms because the anti-art response, Realism, bounced back again in a new outfit but wearing the same smug expression' (1996, p42). Following on from Barthes' elevation of the writerly or writable over the readerly/readable,²¹ Derrida's renowned assertion that '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*'²² and other interrogations of guarantors of meaning, certain critics reach extremes in their advocacy of self-reflexivity and plurality. Andrew Gibson, for example, theorising postmodern narratology, ultimately rejects Bakhtin's dialogism, in his search for a radical, postmodern play of plural voices, because he discerns in Bakhtin a yearning for underlying structure and unity (1996, p156). When, finally, Gibson locates in Joyce's *Ulysses* an author whom he considers exemplary for postmodernism, it is because the text 'more and more ostentatiously declares itself to be writing' (p176). The implications of such an approach for the future of the novel would seem to impose constraints as restrictive as any dictated by realism.

In order to consider the means by which I have pursued the creation of an illusion of reality, I will examine my own strategies as I write 'Seventeen' in terms of character and subjectivity; settings; and the use of figurative language. But first, having wandered through reading about twentieth- and twenty-first century fiction, I want to take my seat in the vast, circular room crowded with English novelists writing novels; I will show briefly how I arrived at this

²¹ '*Scriptible*' versus '*lisible*' [neologisms in French] (Barthes 2002 pp4-5).

²² Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as '*There is nothing outside of the text*,' with the parenthetical qualification, 'there is no outside-text' (Derrida 1976, p158).

particular novel, and how it differs from my previous work, in order to provide a context in terms of my own preoccupations as well as cultural concerns.

‘Seventeen’ in the Context of my Writing

When I was a teenager, Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film *Il Porcile* (1969) struck me as the only realist film I had seen; I read novels by Charlotte Brontë, William Burroughs, Jean-Paul Sartre and Georgette Heyer indiscriminately. As a young woman, I wrote catalogues of what was happening in front of my eyes because I was unable to order reality into stories or express emotion. I burned all my notebooks, together with my first novel, which was fantasy or science fiction rather than realism, when I was twenty-three. When I was twenty-four I began to study Fine Art because I loved imagining and painting, and within the discipline turned to film and video because I discovered an irrepressible instinct for narrative. I first encountered the terms mimesis and diegesis in film studies, where, as in narratology, diegesis tends to mean story, with the corollary that extradiegetic elements are those outside the story being told; such elements often call attention to the medium or the narration. Unlike Doris Lessing, described by Lorna Sage as starting from traditional realism but turning to explore and interrogate its premises (1992, pp13-15), I began with questioning storytelling and with homages to filmmakers such as Maya Deren, Lizzie Borden, Essie Coffey, Joyce Wieland, Jean-Luc Godard, Andy Warhol and Stan Brakhage.

My second novel was autobiographical, fragmented and written in a mixture of first, second and third person. I wrote two or three drafts, sent it off to one publisher and then gave up on it. My third novel, *Make It Back* (2009), I persisted with. It wasn’t autobiographical, but focalised a thirty-year-old mother who left her daughter in England while she nursed children in the Spanish Civil War. The other protagonist who focalised the narrative was a twenty-year-old sculptor, the nurse’s granddaughter, who wanted to remain childless. In a way it was a compensatory fantasy for my life, because I wrote it after I had relinquished my job as a filmmaker, lost my house and spent my savings in order to care full time for my daughter, who had been diagnosed with a life-threatening immune deficiency. The impetus to write the novel came from a newspaper article that criticised the behaviour of a mother of young children who was killed

while she climbed a mountain. Fathers didn't seem to be held to account in the same way. I wondered whether a mother who left her child for more altruistic adventures would also be perceived as unnatural. When I began writing, although I'd heard of the International Brigades, I didn't know that British women had volunteered as nurses. Those I discovered seemed idealistic about freedom and equality. I wanted the narration to contrast their idealism and altruism with the solipsism and selfishness inculcated in many young people brought up during the years of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in the UK. Along with other stylistic features intended to increase the contrast between the two characters, I originally wrote the sections focalised through the nurse in the first person while avoiding use of the first-person pronoun: for instance, from near the beginning:

Hands up to my ears without a thought and out of the ambulance like a stone from a catapult. Slam the door behind me. Push myself across the road through bits of dead donkey and rubble to reach the family who walked past seconds ago. Butcher's stench and burning petrol taint the air. Run towards the fuel pumps like running in a dream (typescript).

But one of my first readers complained that it was unreadable. Attempts to make the narrative engaging resulted in a realistic historical novel. It aspired to irony, in that the reader was supposed to understand more about the naïve young sculptor than she understood about herself, which worked for some readers, who were fascinated by having to deduce her motivations and misreadings, although not for others, who may have assumed the author to be as ignorant as one of the protagonists.

The third novel I wrote was a pastiche of a thriller: a contemporary tale about women's friendship. I began it after my daughter was diagnosed with leukaemia: one of the protagonists was based on my imagining of her as a thirty year old, in a magical-thinking attempt to keep her alive in order to prove me wrong. The biggest influences on it were French feminism and Pedro Almodóvar's *Volver* (2006) (a movie which is part melodrama, part thriller and part comedy and shows women in a world without men—once the character Paula has killed her father in self-defence). It was a playful combination of elements of naturalism with attributes of genre fiction, to emphasise the

importance of friendship and disavow the stereotype of the tragic mulatto;²³ the novel had a happy ending; I had resolved never to write a tragic ending for a dual-heritage character because my daughter is/was²⁴ mixed race and I wanted her to be able to identify with positive characters who had happy outcomes. After she died, I completed a first draft but put it on one side.

When I made a start on this project, characterised by its context as practice-led research, I tried not to think too hard about what I was writing, in the confidence that my imaginings would nevertheless be informed by what I had previously read and written. ‘Seventeen’ began with a piece composed in a workshop with the theme of myth, held as part of Newcastle University’s Spring School in Creative Writing 2009, where we looked at the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice. Here are the first two paragraphs from my prose fiction piece, a revision of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, narrated in Persephone’s voice:

Before I was old enough for yesterday or tomorrow, I had two mothers. One poked tubes in me and tortured me with needles. The other cuddled me on her knee and sang to me the rhythms of my pulse. With my hand as yellow and purple as winter pansies I grabbed for the locket that bounced in time with her heartbeat.

The underworld is no place for a toddler. The good mother fetched me back home, where I practised with bandages, syringes and a broken stethoscope (see Appendix B).

This seemed to contain some kind of psychic reality for a character who voiced my imagining of my daughter. When a studentship allowed me time and energy to focus on research, I became fascinated with the myth, and explored poems by Rita Dove and Louise Glück; I also continued to write prose fiction in the voice of a character, Rosie, who was based on my daughter as a teenager and who focalised some earlier stories.²⁵ I began to search for voices for Rosie’s mother and stepfather.

²³ Mulatto, a category of people originating in the legalised racist discrimination of Atlantic slavery, derives from the Spanish for mule: ie non-human, sterile. ‘All black characters fall into typical and stereotypical patterns [...] the mammy, the faithful retainer, the pickaninny, [...] the tragic mulatto [...] black as well as white writers have worked within this tradition’ (Margaret Walker in Tate 1985, p203).

²⁴ I have one daughter; she will be mixed race for as long as categories of race exist; but she is now dead: hence the confusion of tenses.

²⁵ With my daughter’s permission and approval, in the case of ‘Deep Blue’ (Shaw 2010).

I wanted a reader to be convinced by at least two extraordinary characters (Rosie and Mel) and to participate to some extent in the changes they undergo. The urge that impels me to write is often stimulated by perception of a character in life whom I have never encountered in literature; reading, I delight in characters who seem real.

Looking back through a notebook that records my reading in relation to the process of writing a novel, I find notes about novels I have no recollection of reading as well as those I compared with my ideas about ‘Seventeen’:

Characterisation: compare: the character in Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Lacuna* (2009), where the protagonist shows uncomplicated allegiance to the indigenous people/servants, in spite of antagonism from his more powerful mother etc; strikes me as inhuman/unconvincing compared with the complicated/contradictory affiliations and proliferations of power and loyalty in Andrea Levy’s *Long Song* (2010) (notebook).

I don’t suggest that either *The Lacuna* or *The Long Song* exerted a particular influence on ‘Seventeen’; I merely want to show reading and writing as constantly interactive, and emphasise my preference for characters who seem convincing.

Characters, and perceptions of character in life, together with the problem of how to represent these on the page, are what interest me—up to the point at and beyond which characters assume their own life and direction in relation to style, form, structure and so on. I intend here to consider a few of the strategies of fictional narration that I’ve used in ‘Seventeen,’ beginning with the depiction of characters and briefly dwelling on place and time before touching on tropes in relation to enhancing the illusion of the reality of the protagonists. I will conclude this chapter by noting some of the ways in which my reading around realism, carried out at the stage of editing and revision, affected the process of rewriting my novel.

Such Stuff as Dreams Are Made On

Le Guin quotes Virginia Woolf on character: ‘The great novelists have brought us to see whatever they wish us to see through some character. Otherwise they would not be novelists, but poets, historians, or pamphleteers’ (1979, p102). ‘I love all my characters equally,’ asserted Marilynne Robinson with regard to her

novel *Home* (2008).²⁶ I hated one of the characters in *Home* and sympathised with the immaturity of another, but I tried to love the three focalisers of ‘Seventeen,’ who are also its protagonists, equally. Writing the first draft, I allocated an equal word count to each, in order not to unintentionally privilege one over the other two.

Rosie, Mel and Jay function as centres of consciousness. All actions, objects, events, other characters and so on are perceived or imagined from one or other of their points of view. ‘Fiction operates through the senses,’ states Flannery O’Connor,

and I think one reason that people find it so difficult to write stories is that they forget how much time and patience is required to convince through the senses. No reader who doesn’t actually experience, who isn’t made to feel, the story is going to believe anything the fiction writer merely tells him [sic]. The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted and touched (1970, p91).

‘Seventeen,’ throughout, describes what Rosie, Jay and Mel see, hear, smell, taste and touch: for instance, taking a chapter near the end (in order to check that this sensual perception continues throughout): Cava sizzles on Rosie’s tongue, she hates the taste of blood; Mel listens to oxygen concentrators sounding ‘like the helicopters in *Apocalypse Now* without the Ride-of-the-Valkyries music’ and to birds jostling and cawing above the cemetery; Jay gently rubs Rosie’s legs dry with a towel and regrets the ‘hideous tinned-salmon-pink’ bathroom suite (17th chapter, pp289-306, 10th draft). What these examples demonstrate is that characters are distinguished by senses that predominate, so that although each character employs all five senses, each also has tendencies, preferences and affiliations that individualise them. The narration never states overtly that Rosie notices tastes and people’s body language; that Mel favours his sense of hearing and compares his life with movies; or that Jay is very visual and devoted to Rosie; it accumulates details that perform these characteristics. Such details not only add to the illusion of the reality of the setting, they also enhance a reader’s grasp of the convincing subjectivity of each protagonist.

²⁶ At a talk in Newcastle upon Tyne organised by Newcastle Centre for the Literary Arts, 20.05.2011.

In 'Seventeen,' I elaborate the subjectivity of three characters, a middle-aged White man, a middle-aged White woman and a teenage girl, who relate to each other as family. The narration remains consistently confined to the points of view of these characters, mostly without attributions such as 'she thought' or 'he wished'. Again, a passage chosen at random, this time from the novel's fifth chapter, will illustrate the narrative method that consists of close focalisation or free indirect discourse:

Rosie stares back at him. How does he think she's feeling?
He has destroyed her immune system with chemo and her
blood, bone marrow and mucus membranes with radiation.
Even if Rosie survives her transplant she'll never be able to
have kids and she'll go into menopause at the age of fifteen
unless she has HRT. The lining of her mouth is also
demolished so when she tries to eat chocolate, which used to
be her favourite pastime, it's like cowshit on a flannel. She'll
never get a boyfriend because, apart from one friend-like
kiss on the cheek, the boy she loves keeps his distance as if
cancer is catching. Professor Croc looks like one of those old
white guys who think God created them in his own image,
like he's immortal, omnipotent and that other word that
means you know everything. Use your imagination, she
wants to say.

'Not too good,' she says (pp89-90, 10th draft).

'How does he think she's feeling?' is intended to constitute a direct transcription of the character's thoughts. 'She wants to say' explicitly attributes her thought in contrast to her direct speech. The same method is used for all three focalisers of the narration. In sixteen out of eighteen chapters, sections that present different points of view are separated from the preceding sections by two line spaces in order to clarify the shift for the reader. In two chapters, I inserted no spaces between different focalisers in order to emphasise the characters' closeness as a family in space, time and experience: the first such departure from separation into individual consciousness forms the ninth chapter, when Rosie has recovered from her bone marrow transplant and the family enjoys a holiday in Spain; the second makes up the last chapter, when Rosie is dying in the sitting-room at home.

Even when the centres of consciousness are not divided on the page by line spaces, passages from each point of view are intended to retain characteristics that perform both the commonality of speech patterns that may be

discerned in families, or groups of people who live together, and also the distinctiveness of each individual subjectivity in an era of individual identity. These registers have in common a certain informality relevant to the exposition of personal life in the UK in the twenty-first century; each uses their particular vocabulary, syntax and punctuation in order to form each protagonist's third- or first-person voice.

Rosie's voice, for example, occasionally employs polysyndeton, in which conjunctions link successive clauses, which can bestow on prose a childlike effect. Similes and comparisons tend to use the conjunction 'like' rather than 'as' or 'as though,' in a shift noticeable in writing in general during the last twenty years. Her third-person voice (together with passages in the first person in the main body of each chapter, rather than preludes to chapters) consistently performs in a colloquial, inconsequential register, with frequent modifiers such as 'really,' 'actually' and 'totally,' and, later, references to teen films and TV series at the turn of the millennium. It aims not at 'good writing,' but at a convincing performance of teenage subjectivity. The first-person preludes to each chapter, that present the child's psychic reality from before birth, exercise a more lyrical, poetic register, suggestive of myth rather than reality:

Zero

Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?
Before I was born, in a galaxy not far from ours, on the other side of a supernova, a god was making me out of sand at the edge of an ocean. She was young, inexperienced and a bit drunk, which meant that her hand slipped and she didn't get me quite right. But everything was already in motion, so I shot out of the exploding star and floated like a seed on my parachute of light across this galaxy, through a huge cloud of icy comets into our solar system and down past Pluto, Uranus and Jupiter (Neptune, Saturn and Mars being at the opposite curve of their orbits at the time) (p22, 10th draft).

This alters as Rosie reaches her teenage years, in accordance with the notion that her individual psychic reality becomes dominated by conscious conformity with social reality at this time.

Mel's third-person voice tends towards shorter sentences and a more pragmatic approach to life:

A boy racer speeds past and cuts in front of [him] as the lights turn green. Typical: what an arsehole, but Mel is patient, not like Jay, who'd give him the finger. Try to avoid

Jay driving this weekend without mentioning PMT. Lucky Mel's diary didn't get incinerated. He can't believe he. Reek of burned plastic. Forget about it. The patch of dry skin on his leg itches. His groin itches where the stubble's growing through (p15, 10th draft).

The incomplete sentence ('He can't believe he.') exemplifies an occasional disinclination to face the implications of his actions or to allow unpleasantness to take hold, which results, during the course of the novel, in a desire to escape from the tragic situation that unfolds. However, Mel is a complex character; his loyalty and integrity outweigh the impulse towards flight. I want the illusion of reality to result from delineating characters who are complex and conflicted, and yet display enough invariability to persist as the same person. I base my characters partly on people I have known and found interesting, and on both conscious and unconscious motivations. I have a particular image of Mel, his interactions with others and his opinions and feelings. His flights of fancy relate to movies; he's attracted to glamour and works as the manager/programmer of an independent cinema. My research for this role included a short writing residency at the Tyneside Cinema, during the course of which I observed the Director of Programming, Jonny Tull, negotiating with City Screen over the phone; I knew that Mel's interactions with distributors would diverge widely from what I noticed and recorded.

This distillation of character in relation to real people I found most difficult with regard to the mother, Jay, because in the real-life situation to which the novel relates, I was the mother. It was not until I pictured the mother as another real person known to me that the sections written from her point of view began to convince me.²⁷ Sections of the narrative focalised through Jay typically employ longer sentences than those used for Mel:

He didn't want to say leukaemia but she wouldn't back down. It's such a terrible feeling that she refuses to share it with her loved ones, her family, because her hugest desire is to protect them. Last year when they were on holiday, she can remember it clearly, or maybe she recognises it in the photo Siouxi took, of Jay and Mel sitting in the restaurant with the blue plastic tarpaulin that overlooked the harbour, Mel told her she looked like the actor who played the character who boiled the bunny in that movie where the

²⁷ I asked that person's permission to write about her in fiction— as I had previously asked my daughter and been granted permission.

husband's weekend affair has unwanted effects, either because Jay's hair had gone curly with seawater or because Mel didn't like it blond, but really because he was bored with her, or because he wanted to go to bed with someone else, or because Jay was turning fifty, or because she was trying to make space not to do stuff that made her mind go blank (11th draft, p13).

It was this passage from the first chapter that caused me to realise that Jay visualised events and relationships in terms of photographs; she needed a creative occupation after she was sacked from her job for taking too much leave to care for Rosie, so I turned her into a photographer, rather than a writer as she was in the first draft. Jay's third-person narration also demonstrates *asyntedon*: 'thunder cracks over their house in the dip, it fades away, it rumbles back, they put on their welly boots because rubber doesn't conduct electricity, they sit in the kitchen because it's the lowest part of the house' (p36). *Asyntedon*, a form of verbal compression that omits conjunctions, or replaces full stops with commas, is frequently used by novelists including Stella Duffy (for example in *Theodora* [2010]) and Margaret Atwood; it provides an impression of informality, and of fluidity as opposed to division and rigidity.

Writing the first draft comprised daily concentration on imagining life from the point of whichever character's turn it was to focalise the narrative. But I need to emphasise that the imagination of reality owes as much to texts as to locations, observations and sensory apprehension. Alongside a wide variety of non-fiction that included information about the components, functions and processes of blood, immune systems and transplants, I also read cinema brochures from 2004 to realise Mel's character, and a friend's copies of *Cygnus Review* (a magazine that advertises New Age spiritual and self-help publications) to inspire the more ludicrous of Jay's New Age theories.²⁸ I perused sections of Ali Smith's *The Accidental* (2006) focalised through the teenage girl to stimulate my teenager's voice. I trawled novels by James Lee Burke and Albert Camus for a narrative mode that would suit Mel, and by Jamaica Kincaid and Margaret Atwood for Jay. I also want to stress that my writing reacted against what I did not want for my novel as well as taking inspiration from what I admired: for

²⁸ Eg: 'There are so many angels – the number is limitless – ready to help and to give. We can call on them with their language and allow their resonance to wash through us in floods of spiritual light' (Nahmad 2013, p11).

example, I was impelled to write chapters in which narration focalised through Rosie, Mel and Jay was not separated by line spaces by my reading of *The Accidental*, in which separate sections of narration give the impression that the four family members are completely isolated from each other and from other people, without love or unity. I have been trying to write family love that includes conflict and failure, true love without cloying sentimentality, connections implied by the scientific hypothesis that right now neutrinos—fundamental subatomic particles—are passing right through us: that separate existence is an illusion.

Reading and writing have always been imbricated activities. Reading, I recognise conventions and stereotypes or exult when expectations are confounded. For one example, I relished a scene in Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) in which Felix, a young male protagonist of African-Caribbean heritage quarrels with his older, White English lover Annie:

They were speaking softly enough, but putting their hands on each other, more and more violently[...] In the hall between the bedroom and the lounge, Felix turned round and grabbed both her wrists. He was shaking. He hadn't realised till now what he wanted. Not just that she lose, but that she not exist.

[...] 'Felix, let go, it hurts.'

Felix let go. Touching each other for so long, even in anger, made the anger unsustainable, and they both softened, and lowered their voices, and looked away (pp140-141).

It is the contrast between this passage and the tragic violence enacted by Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), or by Mustafa Sa'eed in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969),²⁹ that delights and convinces me; it resonates with my experience of what life is like, as well as introducing me to a consciousness different from any I've encountered before. It inspires my aim in 'Seventeen' to replace stereotypical representations of racialised encounters with something else.

I have tried to indicate that my aim to create convincing characters in a contemporary novel depends as much on my reading as on my experience of reality (if it's possible to separate the two). The centrality of character continues throughout the novel's approach to place and time, at which I shall look next.

²⁹ Published in Arabic in 1966.

The Chosen Place, the Specific Time

Writing 'Seventeen,' I have striven to depict locations that add to the reality-effect at the same time as enhancing a reader's understanding of character and absorption of tone. I have sketched a historical background that similarly enlarges on the interests of the protagonists while adding to the plausibility of the narrative. In *All Is True*, Furst argues with authority that realist fiction engages the reader in a pretence of reality through the elaboration of a geography that invokes specified locations for the sake of authenticity along with settings that guarantee a time 'not so long ago' (1995, pp 47, 73-115). Place and geography are, for her, central to the reality effect, so that her work becomes particularly relevant to my thinking here.

With regard to the detailed elaboration of locations in fiction, novelists have speculated on the effect of moving pictures. While Forster wondered whether the novel as a form would be eradicated by the predominance of cinema (1987, p151), Johnson found the advent of cinema crucial to the development of the novel, with particular relevance to Joyce's work: 'film could tell a story more directly, in less time and with more concrete detail than a novel,' whereas the novel excels at interior monologue (in Bradbury 1977, p151-152). Any assumption that from 1910 onwards all influential novelists would concern themselves solely with interiority would immediately be proved untenable. Margaret Atwood's pages of descriptions of concrete detail, her layering of details from different times in a character's life or epoch's of a city's expansion, reflect interiority and add to our understanding of characters.

Elizabeth sits on the grey sofa in the underwater light of her living room, hands folded in her lap sedately, as if waiting for a plane. The light here is never direct, since the room faces north; she finds this peaceful. The sofa is not really grey, not only grey; it has a soft mauve underfigure, a design like veining; a batik. She chose it because it didn't hurt her eyes.

....She's in the room on Parliament Street, drinking wine, the slopped glasses making mulberry rings on the rented linoleum of his table, she can see the design on the oilcloth, tasteless wreaths of flowers, lime-green or yellow, as if it's been burnt into her eyes (1989 pp23-24).

The contrast between the inoffensive, muted hues of the grey sofa and the violence of the furnishings of the room where she met her lover accumulates strata apposite to the permeation of *Life Before Man* (1979) by fossils and remnants, but her technique, of accumulation of detail that sculpts a character through a combination of interiority and concrete description, continues in other novels.

Although my novel also aims to convince through interiority combined with descriptions of the material world, I have tended to use a different technique. Conversely, my novel keeps descriptions of objects to a minimum and links them to each protagonist's inspirations, desires and aversions, so that (as a generalisation) Rosie notices clothes and people's interactions, Jay perceives colour, light and natural settings and Mel pays attention to urban environments, technology and women. What each character who focalises the narration observes, or senses, must add not only to a reader's understanding of that text-as-individual but also foreground and characterise the emotional impact of that point in the narrative arc, the particular stage in the story.

Outside, [Mel] lights a Marlboro and sucks in smoke. Hot September sunshine. The streets are quiet since the Congestion Charge. A dark grey splatter-shape on the pavement shows where somebody vomited. Normally Mel would picture an excessively drunk fifteen year old, but today he imagines a teenager throwing up after TBI. Someone has left a double buggy chained to the railings. A man who looks as though he's wearing horror-movie makeup trudges past. The man with half a face, probably on his way to the Middlesex. The Post Office Tower resembles a giant bicycle pump. (11th draft, p82).

A reference to the Congestion Charge places the novel in historical time and adds to verisimilitude. The vomit splatter on the pavement enhances the chapter's references to abjection: that which is expelled from the symbolic system and extruded from the body: blood, excrement, vomit, mucus, tears.³⁰ Descriptions of locations are bound tightly to the perceptions of the protagonists so that, for instance, few details are given about their homes and furnishings, because they are so familiar as to be unremarkable, except when Rosie notices

³⁰ See Kristeva 1982, pp56-89; Douglas 1985; see below, p299.

carpets and coat-hooks on her return home after a month in hospital (p75, above).

Furst discusses ways in which the citation of actual place names within fiction contributes to a novel's verisimilitude. Although 'places such as Saumur, Leeds, or Topeka are no less real than London, Paris, or New York,' she argues, they are less generally known and thus less able to guarantee authenticity and credibility (1995, p94). In 'Seventeen,' an early draft exchanged names of real towns such as Ipswich and Felixstowe for invented locations, based on settings in George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* (1860). Substituting actual place-names in a further revision, I felt no apprehension about the novel's provincality: first because it is necessary to various aspects of the characters: for example, Rosie's opinion that people expect her to be more 'street' because she is categorised as Black (11th draft, p149); and secondly because I can think of novels set in Yorkshire or Hertfordshire that remain powerful due to their insightful delineation of character and psychology.

Although I retained actual place names, I altered streets and houses without compunction: Jay and Rosie live in a street that doesn't exist but would probably be situated where there were allotments when I lived in Ipswich. Again, details of locations noticed by the characters, for instance when 'Mel cycles past the Caribbean Association' (11th draft, p34), are required to fulfil dual functions: as guarantors of credibility, so that a reader familiar with Ipswich during the first decade of this century would recognise that the Caribbean Association building stood at the end of the Woodbridge Road nearest to the town; and as indicators of character, so that his noticing the Caribbean Association contributes to a reader's awareness of ties between the family and the Caribbean community.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes how, 'while writing *Half of a Yellow Sun*, I enjoyed playing with minor things: inventing a train station in a town that has none, placing towns closer to each other than they are, changing the chronology of conquered towns'. Yet she emphasises that she did not alter the central events of the Biafran War: 'I could not let a character be changed by anything that had not actually happened' (2007, p11). The historical setting of 'Seventeen' places it in a time not long ago; reflecting on this setting while writing the first draft, I thought of Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), which was set nearly forty years before its writing and which may have been intended partly

as a tribute to Charlotte's sisters, Emily and Anne, who died in 1848 and 1849. The historical time of 'Seventeen' is the time of George Bush's presidency of the USA, a Labour government in the UK, the July 7th bombings in London and the racist murder of Anthony Walker. (Although one White English reader of a draft of 'Seventeen' questioned the mother's reflections on Walker's murder at the time of crisis caused by the daughter's terminal prognosis, an African-Caribbean-English mother of a child with severe sickle cell anaemia considered the association both plausible and important.)

However, there is a sense in which 'Seventeen' also conveys a mythical time, as when Rosie's narration evokes her existence before she was born (p15, above), and a different time outside history, when events in the enclosed life of the family become so overwhelming that national and international news are ignored. In an essay on 'Women's Time,' Julie Kristeva distinguishes between 'time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding' which is historical time, and a retention of repetition and eternity, allied to reproductive and seasonal cycles and to myths of resurrection (1986, pp192,191). At least one passage in 'Seventeen,' from Jay's point of view, emphasises repetition:

Every day during November a white fog creeps up from the docks and presses round the house. Every day Jay has to trap spiders or crane flies in a glass [...]

Every day turns into a repetition of the day before, the sun lurches above the horizon and drags fog from the estuary, every day Jay counts out Rosie's medicines [...]

Every Monday a hospital transport driver drives them to London, Rosie has a blood test, she waits for the results, a doctor interprets the levels in Rosie's blood, they come home and that is the end of the day. Every Thursday they attend the paediatric oncology clinic at Ipswich Hospital (pp96-97, above).

But in spite of Furst's emphasis on a specific historical time as a guarantor of reality, Jay's focus on repetition and weather is not intended to detract from the reality effect. Anecdotal evidence from more than one source demonstrates that extreme illness, mental ill-health or intense care for a severely ill person can make someone feel that they are living in a different time frame from the rest of the twenty-first century as it rushes on its purposeful way.

The other aspect of time that concerns itself with truth rather than convention is the narrative arc, or plot. Plot is the events and actions in a

narrative ‘as these are rendered and ordered toward achieving particular emotional and artistic effects,’ while structure may be said to consist of the arrangement of a novel into parts, together with the relationship between the parts and the whole (Abrams 1993, pp 159-163, p72). I have devoted considerable thought to the plot of ‘Seventeen,’ in terms of cause and effect: because Rosie had a tracheotomy when she was two years old, she couldn’t speak; the trauma made it difficult for her to stand up for herself, at the same time as impelling her to find a voice. Because Rosie loved Mel and asked him to be her father, Mel made a commitment to her; because Rosie is dying, Mel becomes disillusioned with love. Because Jay was abandoned and lied to as a child, she believed she could never achieve intimacy with another person; having a child altered that conviction; the stress of Rosie’s terminal prognosis returns her to incompetence in relation to Mel. The events unfold in linear sequence, from the day of Rosie’s diagnosis to the day of her death: a period of just over two years. Or they can be said to be structured in linear sequence from before she was born to her death, which takes over seventeen years. But the narrative plays with conventional expectations of plot, replacing the satisfactions of fiction with observed realities. For example, Rosie wants a boyfriend who loves her, but in contrast to successful fictions that satisfy the protagonist’s urgent desire for love,³¹ ‘Seventeen’ defers satisfaction; Rosie’s fancy alters, as the fancies of fifteen year olds do, and she falls in love with Aaron, but illness prevents the accomplishment of her hopes.

I shall return to the demands of structure and plot in my consideration of my novel in relation to trauma fiction, but for now I want to look at metaphor and metonymy as they relate to realism in fiction and in ‘Seventeen’. Use of rhetorical figures clearly demonstrates the artifice involved in creating in words a world which attempts to convince as the stuff of ordinary existence.

Figures of thought:

Metaphor is a trope (or turn, or figure of thought) in which one thing, idea or action is referred to by a word or passage that normally denotes a different thing, idea or action—often one in many ways dissimilar, although metaphor works by

³¹ Downham 2007; Picoult 2004.

conflation, or assertion of similarity. Metonymy is a trope in which a thing is referred to by the name of another thing closely associated with it (eg ‘the White House’ for the US presidency). A history of debate exists over the relationship between metonymy and realist fiction, as distinct from metaphor and poetic function. Metonymy establishes relationships of contiguity between things, which has caused it to be understood as the predominant figure for realist fiction: because that which a character perceives, or that which is contiguous to a character in a setting, often works to evoke the character’s personality, predilections and emotions. An historical alliance between metonymy, denotation, univalence and realism on the one hand, and metaphor, connotation, polyvalence and poetry on the other may be said to commence with Roman Jakobson’s distinction between metonymy as combination and metaphor as equivalence in *The Fundamentals of Language* (1956), as Barbara Johnson observes (1991, pp155-157).

In practice, a distinction between the tropes is problematic. Furst observes that ‘the attempt to segregate the realistic as metonymic from the mythical as metaphoric does not function well in practice because the distinction is by no means clear-cut’ (1995, p163). Johnson notes that ‘it is often very hard to tell the two apart,’ while also noting the privilege traditionally accorded to metaphor (1991, p157).

I find it useful, with regard to these figures of thought in prose fiction, to comprehend metaphor as establishing similarity between a person or thing intended to exist within the world of the novel and one not supposed to exist in this way: eg conflating Megs with a stick insect or Rosie with a human sacrifice (p20 11th draft, p63, above), where neither insect nor sacrifice are intended to be read as present in the fictional world. I understand metonymy, in this context, as displacing essential characteristics of the protagonists or drivers of the plot onto subordinate elements that are contiguous with the protagonists in the narrative. For example, in the sixteenth chapter, the fish tank in the corridor of the paediatric ward is supposed to really exist within the world of the novel, but also functions as a figure of thought, or metonymy, for the restrictions of a life confined to work or hospitals: ‘there are fish in the corridor that live out their entire lifespans in a glass tank that measures a third of a metre by a metre and contains pebbles and plastic weed: an approximation of a life’ (p282, 10th draft).

In conformity with my aim not to jolt the reader away from engagement with the plausibility of the narrative, I've tried to use metonymy to elaborate each focaliser's state. In, 'on the wall [...] she can see a spray of blood dried shiny and almost black. It isn't Rosie's blood. She wishes somebody would clean it off. Outside the window, rain on the brick building opposite makes it glisten like a flayed body' (p89, 10th draft), both the spray of someone else's blood and the simile of the flayed body work not only to describe Rosie's surroundings but also the horror of her situation and her feelings of vulnerability. The fish tank in the corridor of the paediatric ward contrasts with the freedom and beauty of Mel's holiday dive in the previous chapter; both tank and ocean are supposed to exist within the world of the novel, while simultaneously contrasting the life Mel wants with that he abhors.

My intention has been to use figures of thought that promote the verisimilitude of each character in accordance with my intuitive grasp of them. In contrast to Rosie's pragmatism and vivid sense of the ridiculous, and Mel's capability and decided opinions, Jay's flakiness and visual imagination allowed me more scope with metaphor, for instance, 'Jay is despatching a flock of blessings that will migrate across the Atlantic Ocean, fold their wings to nestle against the donor and chirrup her gratitude' (p85, 10th draft?). I find it interesting that I believe I've avoided the use of metaphor in Mel's and Rosie's narration, whether in the first or third person, and yet a cursory glance reveals examples such as those I used before: 'they've trussed her into a human sacrifice' (Mel, above p63) or 'which is impressive for a stick insect' (Rosie, 11th draft p20).

I also want to return to—and dismiss in the case of this novel—the historical alliance between metonymy and univalence. In 'Seventeen,' an example of metonymy in which my three protagonists' desires, fears and vital motivations are displaced onto an element of their surroundings is provided by water, in underground conduits, streams, taps, rain, fish tanks, baths, seas and oceans. In its different aspects, water can connote freedom, pleasure and sexuality, danger and death, refreshment and healing, or the unconscious with all its contradictions. Metonymy is used here as a strategy to augment the novel's illusion of reality, while also evoking multiple associations and polyvalence. I shall return to examine these figures of thought in relation to representations of my characters' unconscious, in the next chapter; for the present, I merely want to

offer a few concluding remarks concerning the effect of my critical exploration of realism on the writing of the novel.

Exploring ideas and debates around realism and the aim for truth in fiction has made me realise how capacious realist modes remain. My enquiry has inspired me to revise my novel, allowing more freedom with regard to character, voice and form. While the first five drafts of 'Seventeen' experimented with person, tense, voice, layout and so on in an intuitive way, the sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth applied more discipline and consistency in a rational manner. I could argue for such consistency, and yet the life had gone out of the work in some indefinable way. Finally, reading around realism helped me to realise that I don't have to conform to any genre in my writing: I can write what I like. Rereading Atwood's *Life Before Man* (1979), I noticed inconsistencies in person, for instance when Elizabeth's point of view is suddenly narrated in the first person (1989 p25, pp98-99), which did not detract from my belief or engagement in the world of the novel. I subsequently made changes in 'Seventeen' that included altering Rosie's third-person voice to first person where it struck me as appropriate: for instance in parts of the fourth chapter (pp58-64) and the seventeenth chapter (pp290-291). I also arranged Jay's uncomfortable memories of her late teenage years/young adulthood in the form of two lists, and generally returned to a more playful approach.

I wanted to make the novel convincing because I wanted the characters to become as convincing as possible. When I began writing 'Seventeen,' I wanted to create my daughter in language because I had lost her in reality; I've still lost her, and the teenager I've created in language is in no way equivalent to the real person. For the teenager, dying was traumatic. For a parent, watching a child die constitutes trauma. In the next chapter, I shall look at the composition of 'Seventeen' in relation to the aesthetics and ethics of trauma fiction.

‘Seventeen’ and the Ethics and Aesthetics of Trauma Fiction

I began to write this novel without the ability to articulate clearly either what it was about or my reasons for wanting to write it. Although the importance of conveying the interest of the project succinctly is obviously vital in order to elicit a reader’s desire to read, not knowing and being unable to communicate a reductive summary allow a space for creativity that is not trammelled by the necessity of adhering to a rigid plan. However, critical reflection seems to require analysis of motives as well as methods. The closest I can venture to abbreviation of a compelling impetus is Hamlet’s penultimate speech, uttered as he dies, to Horatio: ‘If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, /Absent thee from felicity a while, And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain /To tell my story’ (Shakespeare 1623, Act 5 Sc2, ll298-301). That, or Toni Morrison’s opinions following the death of her son, uttered in an interview in 2012:

What do you say? There really are no words for that. There really aren’t [...] There’s no language for it.

[...] Books that have been written about the death of a child, but are all about the author. And people who were trying to soothe me, were trying to soothe me. I never heard anything about him. They say it’s about the living, it’s not, it’s about the dead.³²

I have been trying to write a novel about the dead: the dead child, the dead family. I’ve been trying to find words for it.

While my fictional family enjoys a seaside holiday in Spain at the zenith of the narrative, when Rosie seems recovered from the ordeal of a bone marrow transplant, her stepfather, Mel, quotes the movie *Casablanca* (1942), which was produced in the Warner Bros California studios but set in North Africa during the Second World War: ‘The problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world’ (p153, 11th draft). Each of the three protagonists of ‘Seventeen’ has undergone and continues to endure experiences that may be considered traumatic: Rosie nearly died as a toddler forced to undergo a tracheotomy, and during the course of the novel is given a terminal prognosis; Jay as a child was told lies about her father’s death, and has to watch her

³² Interviewed by Emma Brockes, 14 April 2012, *Guardian Weekend*, London (pp31-35).

daughter suffering from a fatal illness; Mel had to bear identity-threatening bullying during his childhood, and has to watch his stepdaughter dying. Yet the traumatic experience of facing death from illness, as individuals, remains distinct from traumas inflicted by other human beings: war and genocide, for example. In this chapter, I will explore whether the poetics of my novel-in-progress accord with definitions of or prescriptions for an aesthetics of trauma fiction, and examine questions of appropriation and representation of points of view and historically-conditioned identities that differ from my own in terms of categories of race (and gender) as well as experiences of life. Finally, I intend to look at the relevance of the workings of the unconscious in psychic trauma and the challenge of how to represent unconscious processes through the behaviour and consciousness of my protagonists.

The American Psychiatric Association's (APA's) criteria for a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) diagnosis include in the first place a stressor event in which 'the person has experienced, witnessed, or been confronted with an event or events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others,' and in which 'the person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror'.³³ Critics addressing trauma fiction define the experience of trauma as one that we are unable to assimilate according to the usual mental mechanisms: one that challenges our understanding of reality and calls into question existing models of the world (eg Granofsky 1995, p8; Ganteau and Onega 2011, p9). This definition accords with Rosie's experiences in 'Seventeen':

She's lying in bed at Mel's house with her Chinese crimson walls that Mel helped her paint and her hammock that he finally put up after about ten years, and she doesn't want to go to sleep. She doesn't want to die. What is she terrified of? She'll have to go through a door in the dark without knowing what lurks behind it (p247, 7th draft).

'Seventeen' exposes a radical disjunction between normal teenage life in the UK, with its challenges around relationships, growing independence, work, exams and drugs, and the experiences of a terminally-ill teenager. It discloses the

³³ (DSM-IV, 2000) <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/pages/dsm-iv-tr-ptsd.asp> See Appendix C. I have cited DSM-IV because it is the diagnostic manual with which I have worked during the writing of 'Seventeen' and my critical reflection. A summary of changes made in DSM-5 (2013) is also given.

effects of the teenager's trauma on the subjectivities and lives of her mother and stepfather.

Critics trace the development of the notion of psychic trauma from pioneers such as Pierre Janet, who proposed that traumatic memory can be healed by its assimilation into a narrative of the patient's life.³⁴ They follow the idea through the work of Freud and Breuer with soldiers who fought in the 1914-18 War. The Holocaust against the Jewish people tends to be confirmed as the determining catastrophe in establishing trauma as paradigmatic, since after 1945 European civilisation was forced to address the barbarism of genocide. Reading such accounts causes me instantly to remark that this ascription has been called into question in other contexts: for instance by Wole Soyinka, who locates the failure of European humanism at the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, considering disregard for the brutality of the peculiar institution as 'further proof that the European mind has yet to come into full cognition of the African world as an equal sector of a universal humanity' (1999, p38); or by Toni Morrison's dedication at the beginning of *Beloved*, 'Sixty million and more' (1988, frontispiece), which implicitly contrasts lives destroyed by the slave trade with the estimate of Jewish people murdered in death camps.

Whatever they argue to be the founding cultural trauma, these critics agree in tracing the development of cultural trauma theory back to the APA's addition of PTSD to the third edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) nosologic classification scheme in 1980. The recognition of PTSD as a classifiable mental disorder came about as a result of political campaigning and lobbying by and on behalf of veterans of the Vietnam War (1955-1975).

In order to examine the ethics and aesthetics of 'Seventeen' in relation to discussions of the ethics and aesthetics of trauma fiction, I need to return to my definitions of ethics and aesthetics, undertaken in the introduction to this critical reflection. To recapitulate: ethics is a set of moral principles governing or influencing conduct, concerned in the case of my writing with agency, with truth and with kindness. Aesthetics is a set of principles concerned with the nature and

³⁴ See Caruth 1995; Granofsky 1995; Whitehead 2004; Luckhurst 2008; Ganteau and Onega 2011, for example.

appreciation of beauty in art, through which I exercise judgement about the appropriate form, style and poetics.

I shall begin with an instance that involves the poetics of time. In this case a symptom of psychological trauma is discovered by cultural or literary critics to manifest itself as an aesthetic feature of trauma fiction.

Belatedness

Cathy Caruth, who edited a seminal volume of essays by psychiatrists, literary theorists, filmmakers, sociologists and Holocaust survivors, *Trauma:*

Explorations in Memory (1995), emphasises *Nachträglichkeit*, or belatedness, as a defining feature of psychological trauma:

The pathology consists [...] solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or event (pp4-5).

However, the APA's diagnostic manual allows not only repeated intrusions of the traumatic event into consciousness and dreams, but also, or instead, marked avoidance of anything associated with the event, together with an inability to remember, as symptomatic of PTSD.³⁵ Sigmund Freud, when he speculated in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920) on traumatic neurosis, retrospective attempts at active mastery of psychological trauma caused by unexpected frights, and the compulsion to repeat, showed himself at his most tentative (1991a, p333). Caruth's insistence on belatedness postulates one typical model of PTSD, in which a subject is unable to assimilate and process an experience that later emerges in the form of symptoms described in the diagnostic canon in terms of recurrence,³⁶ as constitutive of trauma fiction.

Anne Whitehead proposes that this disruption of cause and effect, of linear time, results in the haunting or possession by ghosts which is a feature of novels such as Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Michèle Roberts' *Daughters of the House*, (1993), Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces* (1997) and Pat Barker's *Another*

³⁵ These symptoms were also given in the DSM-III (1987), which would have been current when Caruth was writing and researching. <http://www.cirp.org/library/psych/ptsd/>

³⁶ See Appendix C.

World (1998) (2004, p6). Roger Luckhurst observes that ‘the ghost as figure of trauma has become almost a cliché,’ which seems rather dismissive, considering that it tends to be how topics or figures are handled in writing that results in their triteness or resonance, although he points out that *Beloved* was amongst those texts to inaugurate the trope (2008, p93). In *Beloved*, the eponymous, multivalent ghost, at one and the same time beloved, excessively damaged and malevolent, who must disappear, or explode, acts as an appropriate and powerful metaphor for an appalling history that remained unacknowledged and unexpiated for centuries; rather than haunting only the mother who killed her, she haunts an entire culture: the spectre that haunted Europe.

Speculating on ways to make my story vivid and embody harm inflicted during the protagonists’ childhoods, I decided against invoking spectres. Supernatural tales aim to make the flesh creep and raise hairs on the back of the reader’s neck. Although occasionally visceral in its descriptions, my novel confines its supernatural apparitions to vampires and zombies courtesy of HBO TV and Universal Pictures, to images from popular culture that are never intended to seem real within the fictional world, but which dialogically inflect the teenager’s subjectivity as she undergoes horrific medical treatments. It aims to imagine unconscious psychical processes caused by trauma, guilt or fear in terms of their effects on characters’ behaviour and interactions, rather than to embody them in menacing spooks. While close focalisation endeavours to express each protagonist’s psychic reality alongside external reality, their unconscious urges can only be inferred from what I have written, which represents their consciousness. I shall return to the challenges of evoking unconscious processes below.

On the one hand my novel avoids belatedness in its apparent structure and poetics, while on the other each of its protagonists is haunted by her or his past. The narrative arc of ‘Seventeen’ moves conventionally from left to right, into the future, from 2004 to 2006. In terms of the poetics of person and tense, the novel’s preponderantly third-person narration, with close focalisation through each character, is required in order to distinguish between the three protagonists and to limit knowledge to what each understands, senses and remembers. The present tense is necessary for two reasons: so that the reader will vicariously experience the characters’ shock at various diagnoses and

prognoses; and also in order for the disparate perceptions of Rosie, Mel and Jay not to be ascribed to alterations brought about as perception transforms into memory: the reader is intended to question whether people perceive situations, events and interactions differently as they occur. Use of the present tense would appear, precisely, to imply presence and deny belatedness, to suggest current experience and avoid retrospection.

Yet the novel deploys repetitions and correspondences. As Whitehead notices, repetition ‘at the levels of language, imagery or plot [...] mimics the effects of trauma, for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression’ (2004, p86). Even as I assert its conventional linear structure, I realise that in ‘Seventeen’ the rational time of history (2004 to 2006) is structured according to the time of Rosie’s psychic reality (zero to seventeen). Its narrative arc is interrupted by repetitions and by intrusions of the past that occasionally overwhelm the exposition even though at other times they seem hardly perceptible to the protagonists themselves. Every chapter, for example, is preceded by a prelude written in the first person from Rosie’s point of view; though brief, these preludes determine the novel’s division into eighteen chapters: one for the months before she was born and one for each year of her life. The first begins with the questions ‘Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?’ (p19, 11th draft); the questions allude to Paul Gauguin’s 1897 painting, *D’où Venons Nous / Que Sommes Nous / Où Allons Nous*; they prefigure the deep questions noted by psychologists who work with young people facing death (eg: Judd 1995). The preludes reveal traumas in Rosie’s life before she became able to articulate them and implicitly suggest belatedness in her apprehensions and fears as she faces death for a second time. On p80 (10th draft), in the prelude to the fourth chapter:

They kill me because I am naughty. I am burning. My throat hurts. I am crying and crying. At first I can’t breathe and then I glide in a boat on a dark river where ghosts eat what I know out of my skull with spoons. They stick straws up my nose so they can suck my brain. The boat arrives in heaven or hell, where the women dressed in white put what they know into tubes in me. Air, sweet milk and bitter medicine. They take away my voice. They take away my running so I

can't move but they can still walk. This is hell, nor am I out of it.³⁷

This passage relates Rosie's experience as a two year old (during her third year), when in Intensive Care she was intubated, ventilated and fed with a nasogastric tube following epiglottitis. Belatedness and recurrence may be traced repeatedly, for instance on p301 (10th draft), when Rosie has chosen to return home to die, she asks the nurse to read her favourite poem. Listening, she hopes that 'at the end of her suffering there will be a door. She will return to find a voice'. Her hopes offer an understated reminder of the trauma of her intubation and tracheotomy when she could not speak. Such correspondences form a mosaic pattern throughout the novel.

For the other two protagonists, repressed or partly-repressed memories recur as structural factors in their characters if not in the narrative. Mel, the stepfather, remained in the tenth draft a character who had made a decision to accept himself and to dismiss other people's notions of stigma attached to their perception of his physical disability; he still, in the eleventh draft, tends to avoid reflection on unpleasantness, together with interpretations of the past. His first conscious thought of being bullied as a child emerged on p145, towards the end of a 300-word passage that divulged how he came to love cinema: 'They hurled those four-letter words with an i in them at Mel, so that the occasion was hardly a distraction from real life'. The reference was only clarified ninety pages later, in the course of a disagreement with Jay; even here, Mel thought rather than spoke about

all the shit he went through as a kid. All the times the lads at school called him Crip or Gimp or those other hates. Forced him to take the role of Captain Hook when they played Peter Pan. Never even a Lost Boy or a Redskin. Why he always played with Siouxsie rather than the lads. All those years between thirteen and twenty-five when he hid his hand up his sleeve or in his pocket. He doesn't go round moaning and wailing about how hard life is. How when he fails to get a job he can't help wondering whether prejudice has caused employers to discriminate against his perceived disability, although he is not in fact disabled (p235, 10th draft).

³⁷ 'Ghosts eat what I know' reveals once again a failure in my awareness of what I am writing/have written; I stated above the absence of spectres from the novel; but here they are.

It is not my intention, any more than it lies within my capability, to discuss whether the disruption to physical integrity involved in being born with a different hand, or perceived as lacking a hand, constitutes trauma; or whether bullying aimed at a boy perceived as different because of red hair or long hair might constitute trauma. My aim in writing Mel's character has been to form him as laudably strong in his self-acceptance and pleasantness, but also to suggest that he may be influenced by his own past in ways he cannot recognise.

Jay, in contrast, is revealed from the first chapter as reflecting on the past in order to attempt to improve the future: in the tenth draft, she wondered whether her relationship with Mel went wrong a year ago 'because he was bored with her, or because he wanted to go to bed with someone else, or because Jay was turning fifty, or because she was trying to make space not to do stuff that made her mind go blank' (p20, 10th draft). Again, the 'stuff,' which at that stage of the writing consisted of life-threatening sexual abuse of Jay and her sister, Beth, by an elderly relative, was only explained much later, and even then indirectly:

The only time they talked about their step-grandfather, they were both in their forties. Afterwards Beth started to hear voices that issued commands from the radio, she set fire to her flat and was committed to mental hospital. She's never had a long-term relationship except with a married man and has no children. Jay feels as though she is at some level an exact replica of her sister, she no longer has a cat, when she was a child she loved her cat more than anybody else in the world but she used to strangle him and then say sorry, psychopaths hurt animals when they're children but Jay has changed. She didn't hurt Rosie, but Rosie turned out to have a bone marrow condition that meant she couldn't breathe when she got an infection, Jay can't make any sense of it (p199, 10th draft).

Later in the chapter, Beth, since deleted as a character for the sake of clarity, referred to sexual abuse. Rape and sexual abuse have constituted foci of what Luckhurst has termed 'a parallel women's trauma fiction' (2008, p88) in a phrase that drags alongside itself various inferences: one being that men may not be subject to rape and sexual abuse, which would obviously be untrue; another, that trauma fiction proper consists of fiction that deals with trauma suffered by men, with women's trauma confined to rape and sexual abuse, which constitute a corollary to trauma itself —although when I look back at the context of

Luckhurst's remark, I find that he means parallel to Vietnam fictions. Kalí Tal, researching US literatures of trauma, including Vietnam fictions and narratives of rape and incest prior to 1990, quotes a survivor who insists that incest was not a social taboo; it was mentioning incest that was forbidden (1996, p214). While Whitehead adopts the resistance of traumatic experience to its representation in language as an initial definition (2004, p3), Michelle Balaev suggests that the unspeakability of trauma 'can be understood less as an epistemological conundrum or neurobiological fact, [...] more as an outcome of cultural values and ideologies'; how much is narrated depends on what is permitted by social standards and cultural conventions (2008, p157).

The implications of such a hypothesis are complex, even in relation to the novel I'm engaged in writing. Whitehead summarises work on narrative as a cure for pathological cathexes of loss, carried out by Freud and Janet: traumatic or melancholic memory is paralysing, repetitive and incapable of change, while narrative memory is capable of invention and improvisation; 'for Janet, the conversion of traumatic memory into narrative memory represents the process of recovery from trauma' (2004, p87). The sentence I've just written immediately summons a memory of my daughter playing doctors at the age of four or five: revising her own role as passive recipient of painful medical procedures may have helped her to heal from the trauma of tracheotomy, intubation and lengthy hospitalisation for life-threatening illness. Such memories have been articulated and incorporated into my fiction from the point of view of the character Rosie: for example, 'Amma has no tubes. She pulls the tube off my throat and she is naughty. I will be the doctor. I will listen to her heart and lungs with the stethoscope and poke a needle in her hand so she has to cry. I give her some medicine and I bandage her hand' (p74, 10th draft). Revisions and inventions made in the process of writing the novel suggest that I myself am involved in the process of changing traumatic memory into narrative memory. Does this mean that my work is purely therapeutic, and will have little value for readers of fiction? I consider myself a writer; I have read widely, and relate what I write to a broad range of contemporary and antecedent fiction in a professional manner. My project to turn deeply-felt experiences into fiction is both an ethical one, in

that I am attempting to convey ‘life or spirit, truth or reality’³⁸—while I consider readers’ responses seriously, together with the response of my own fiction to existing novels—and an aesthetic one in that the style of the writing constitutes that which exists on the page and communicates to my readers; in this way, ethics and aesthetics are obviously inseparable.

If the unspeakability of trauma can be attributed to social conventions, then writing about trauma may be considered a political act of defiance against the established order. One of the forces that urges me to try to tell the truth in fiction about a child dying is continued silence surrounding the topic. Many twentieth- and twenty-first-century guides to dealing with sick and dying children advise listening, and honesty (Bluebond-Langner 1978; Hindmarch 2006; Judd 1995; Niethammer 2012; Price and McNeilly 2009). Bluebond-Langner’s groundbreaking, influential, anthropological study of terminally ill children asked whether such children knew they were dying, how they came to know it and why the topic was taboo (1978, p239). Her thorough study of leukaemic patients, undertaken in hospital, noticed that parents and staff members avoided dying children,³⁹ particularly if the child cried or showed awareness of his or her impending death, and that, possibly as a consequence, parents, staff and dying children were involved in maintaining a mutual pretence of normality; ‘the children need to share their knowledge, but they also need to have their parents with them....Children will do whatever is necessary to keep their parents near’ (1978, p235). She counselled medical professionals to treat disclosure of terminal prognoses along the same lines as those used when deciding what to tell children about sex: ‘tell them only what they want to know, what they are asking about, and on their own terms’ (p233). The title of Dietrich Niethammer’s *Speaking Honestly with Sick and Dying Children and Adolescents: Unlocking the Silence* shows very clearly that communication continued to be an issue when his book was published in 2012. Both Bluebond-Langner and Niethammer conclude that dying children are aware of their prognoses. Niethammer describes the first time he was confronted with a dying child, in the mid-1960s: a twelve-year old girl in hospital who refused to speak to the doctors, nurses or her parents (during their twice-weekly visiting hours),

³⁸ Woolf 1984, p160.

³⁹ See also Judd 1995, p40.

and who died alone one night (p3). He advocates honesty because it allows a child to trust adults and take part in decision making; without honesty, children are abandoned to suffer distress in isolation; unspoken grief at the impending loss of life may break their over-fraught hearts. He demonstrates that although medical staff urge parents to speak honestly with their dying children, the topic remains so difficult that few manage to approach it.

Conversely, the proliferation of confessional shows on TV and misery memoirs hitting bestseller lists indicates that confessions and allegations concerning acts and experiences erstwhile compartmentalised as private are now commodified for consumption. Tal investigates the complex tensions and contradictions that pervade political and cultural codifications of trauma, including mythologisation, medicalisation and disappearance (1996, p6); ‘as a society, we have effectively inhibited Viet Nam veterans from speaking in terms other than those we have defined as acceptable, silencing those whose stories fall outside the boundaries of convention,’ she asserts, for instance (p14). The reason for Jay’s understated memories of childhood abuse was to distinguish her attitude from sensational narratives that either dramatise or deny the effects or occurrence of domestic physical and sexual brutality. The narrative instanced her character’s attitude as typical of men and women who, having suffered rape and life-threatening abuse, refuse to retain the trauma as central to their identity or to repeat cycles of violence, but instead work at establishing self-esteem and forming trusting relationships.⁴⁰ The barely-remarkable stimulus for the precipitating event in Ali Smith’s novel *There But For The* (2011) is a conversation about musicals that causes Miles to lock himself in his hosts’ spare bedroom; childhood abuse is not sensationalised here, but sensational media stories ensue, within the narrative, from the adult survivor’s perception of one cue that symbolises the trauma. In contrast, I intended Jay’s back-story to reveal how troubling factors that a character has dealt with can resume significance in stressful circumstances without dominating the narrative; I changed these factors to lies and abandonment in order to simplify the character arc and clarify the plot.

⁴⁰ I based this assertion with regard to the behaviour and intentions of trauma survivors on empirical knowledge of more than one person in the real world, but see also Tal 1996, p114, and LaCapra 2001, p70.

In 'Seventeen' neither Jay's nor Mel's past traumas intrude into the present of the narrative except inasmuch as they give the mother and stepfather pre-existing problems that place further strains on their relationship. The trauma and the story are Rosie's, and the family's, but unlike the family in Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper* (2004), which achieves the effect of having been a blank, level field before Anna's leukaemia diagnosis, Rosie's family already has fault lines disrupting its stability. Belatedness, understood by Caruth as a defining feature of psychological trauma, structures 'Seventeen' from Rosie's point of view. With regard to the other protagonists, Mel and Jay, it surfaces in subtle ways because of decisions that I have made purposefully and intuitively.

A discussion of belatedness instances the way in which a symptom of psychic trauma has become a feature of trauma fiction—at the level of the poetics of time. The treatment of time in 'Seventeen' includes deferral because of my understanding of the ways in which trauma and stress have affected the protagonists. In the next section, I intend to give some consideration to other aesthetic indicators of trauma fiction that also relate to symptoms or experiences of psychic trauma.

Aesthetics of Trauma Fiction

Halfway through 'Seventeen,' Rosie is given a terminal prognosis, an unprecedented and overwhelming event that constitutes psychological trauma and places the novel within the field of trauma fiction. Various critics have proposed or questioned a categorical aesthetic that serves as a model for, or defines, trauma fiction. Susana Onega, for instance, asserts that in *The Stone Gods* (2007) Jeannette Winterson's 'baroque aesthetics of repetition and her poetic language of sensations, feelings and affects' constitute an extravagant rhetoric of trauma: this aesthetic intends to convince, move and seduce the reader through devices such as rhythm, symbols, intertextuality and excessive troping that obviate distance, irony or humour (in Ganteau and Onega pp298, 272-298). Interested in this idea of excessive troping, I notice that the first page of *The Stone Gods* contains figures that include 'big as cities,' 'deep as nightmares,' 'like skyscrapers,' 'the weight of a breaking universe,' 'soft and small as a mouse ear' and 'like a cut' (Winterson 2008, p3). As a relatively

inexperienced novelist aiming at mastery of skills, I would consider these to constitute mixed metaphors and delete some so that they would not weaken each other; besides which, as similes rather than metaphors proper, they instance a trope considered ineffectual in its role as comparison rather than substitution. Revising 'Seventeen,' one of my strategies has consisted of deleting similes that fail to contribute to the revelation of character or the layering of images intended to suggest unconscious processes (see below pp308-319). In contradistinction to Onega's apprehension of Winterson's project, my novel aims to deploy humour to deflect the weight of the unbearable for the reader as it does for the narrating subjects.

Luckhurst investigates a trauma aesthetic discerned by critics in works held to be exemplary because they include such elements as temporal disruption, disorders of emplotment, retrospective reinterpretation, interruptions, repetitions, and disjunct movements in style, tense, focalisation or discourse.⁴¹ He demonstrates succinctly how such properties are determined according to ethical imperatives, for instance by the impossibility of comprehending the Holocaust against the Jewish people, an aporia which resists containment by conventions of character and story; or by a feminist requirement for women's agency in narratives and as narrators. Avoidance of conventions of narration, character, plot and style produces innovations that may in turn become conventional; for example, all the postgraduate students of prose fiction with whom I spoke at the 2013 Great Writing Conference were writing 'fragmented narratives'; none stated the aim of writing a unified, cohesive or coherent narrative. Trauma fiction may be written in opposition to a mainstream culture that moulds narratives into trite forms that conclude with restoration or use suspense and prurience to exploit terror. On the other hand, Luckhurst remarks, citing Tal's work on trauma testimony, constant vigilance against banality can result in rejection of popular culture and a critical focus on form rather than content, aesthetics rather than ethics (2008, pp88-90).

My novel-in-progress aims to be a coherent, convincing fiction that remains faithful to the sometimes-contradictory points of view of its

⁴¹ Although I have seen quotations in graduate students' work that assume that Luckhurst is recommending such an aesthetic, he remarks, on the topic, that 'this is sometimes explicitly stated in prescriptive terms' (2008, p88).

protagonists. Far from abjecting popular culture, it refers to TV programmes and movies, as well as inflecting its voices with dialogical echoes or arguments to texts such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*⁴² or *Hollyoaks*.⁴³ It reacts against other fiction that transforms the trauma of childhood leukaemia and/or death into a gripping plot-with-a twist, or a conventional plot that satisfies the protagonist's deepest desires, in order to adhere to experiences of reality along with research into the psychology and interactions of terminally ill children and their families. For example, while Jenny Downham's novel aimed at a young adult readership, *Before I Die* (2007), makes its teenage protagonist's mother and father kinder to each other in a wish-fulfilling restoration before her death, and while Lee Hall's monologue *Spoonface Steinberg* (1997) returns the child's father to the family home, 'Seventeen' shows how added stress fractures the relationship between Rosie's parents. In spite of this fracture, I have aimed to write a coherent narrative that engages the reader with distinct characters who alter during the course of the novel.

The style in which I have written 'Seventeen' includes descriptions of the trivial and the mundane as well as the visceral. The first chapter aimed to establish normality for the family, with third-person narration focalised through the teenager, the stepfather and the mother in turn: at school, at work and at home. For Rosie,

Inspiration strikes. Except it doesn't actually strike, more fizzles up through [her] like a fit of the giggles. And it's catching, like laughter. So at the end of school Rosie, Feebs, Megs and Barbie loiter with intent in the classroom, which is actually their tutor-group room. They totally have an ambitious plan. To turn back time. Rosie's stomach hurts, not because she feels nervous. She doesn't know why. She wishes it didn't but she's also kind of used to it.

'Well somebody should stand outside the door in case—be on the lookout,' says Megs as soon as the last Friday-afternoon straggler has left[...]

'Be on the lookout for what, you muppet?' Feebs bends forward, shakes her head and then flips her hair as she stands back up. 'Body and volume.'

'Well, Mrs Winsome for example.'

⁴² US TV series (teen drama), first aired on WB Network in 1997, originally written and directed by Joss Whedon, continued for seven seasons.

⁴³ British TV series (teen drama), first broadcast on Channel 4 in 1995, originally devised by Phil Redmond, continuing.

[...]Rosie knows for a fact that *she's* not going to stand outside, nor is she climbing in a skirt. 'It was my idea. I want to turn it back. What d'you think?[...]An hour would be funny because he might think they forgot to put it forward when the clocks changed. But half an hour would be funnier because it will be closer to the right time, so he'll think he's got it wrong.'

Rosie twists the hands back half an hour, Barbie replaces the clock and they are all laughing already (10th draft, pp3-4).

In order to produce normality for a teenager in 2004, I have combined idealism, in which the young women are concerned about leadership and the state of the world, with silliness where they collect idiotic sayings by George Bush, at that time President of the USA (10th draft, p2), and turn the clock back in their classroom to play a trick on their form tutor. As I noted earlier, I have used a colloquial, inconsequential register, with frequent modifiers such as 'really,' 'actually' and 'totally,' and, later, references to teen films and TV series at the turn of the millennium. This is an ethical and aesthetic project to narrate Rosie as a 'normal' teenager, rather than as an exceptional person who might be equipped to face trauma and disability.

With each of the three protagonists, third-person narration aims to use a register (vocabulary, syntax etc), imagery and references to intertexts that express the particular character. Mel, for example, 'wants to be in *Singin' in the Rain* not bloody *Terms of Endearment*' (p170, 11th draft). When Jay sees Mel as 'a diamond, compressed into strength and brilliance by adversity he never talks about' (p272), the image is not intended to impress the reader but to reflect Jay's tendency to New-Age flakiness.

The 'compelling bodily force of anti-aesthetics'⁴⁴ may be discerned in 'Seventeen' in descriptions of body parts, insertions, excretions, vomiting and wounding. Julia Kristeva in her essay on abjection asserts that wounds and excrement, rather than signifying death, display what we must constantly thrust to one side 'in order to live;' they reveal that 'I am at the border of my condition as a living being' (1982, p3). Rosie is confronted with her body, her animal self, which Kristeva understands as conflated by Judaeo-Christian culture with the

⁴⁴ Posited by José M Yebra, 'Ethics, Aesthetics and Gayness in *The Line of Beauty*', in Onega and Ganteau 2011, p207.

mother and Mother Nature (pp90-100). But even in the invention of tropes connected with abjection I have recognised the prudishness of a teenage girl, and aimed as often for litotes as for hyperbole, as when (from Jay's point of view): 'A big clot pokes out of her nostril, glistening like a black slug. / "It doesn't feel nice." / "Better not pull it out. I'll get some loo roll"' (10th draft, p239). Focalisation of the narrative through a teenager who wants above all to be normal, a mother who loves her and pretends to be normal and a stepfather who also adores her, and who is convinced that he is normal, results in a refusal to dwell on excrement and abjection: an attempt to keep boundaries in place, in Kristevan terms. I have also aimed to juxtapose such evocations with the characters' tragicomic denial and avoidance, intended to provide a relief to the reader as well as to the characters from harrowing experiences.

The townscape inhabited by my protagonists is provincial, neither city nor rural wasteland; it has not been transformed by catastrophe, although their reality has. In Bao Ninh's *Sorrow of War*, the North Vietnamese landscape evinces the horror of the protagonist's own wounds: 'Bloated human corpses, floating alongside the bodies of incinerated jungle animals, mixed with branches and trunks cut down by artillery, all drifting in a stinking marsh' (1998, p3). My contrasting project is encapsulated in the final chapter when Mel leaves the house where Rosie is dying to buy a paddling pool for her to bathe in because she has become too weak to climb the stairs to the bath:

The car interior has overheated again even though he parked in the shade of a spindly tree. He lights a cigarette, opens both windows and heads up the London road to Tesco. He asks an assistant. He wants to tell the woman, My daughter is dying of leukaemia and she needs a paddling pool to bathe in, as though his urgency might make the right pool materialise. He looks at the boxes, trying to make sense of them. The woman points out the display. The three-ring pool is perfect: high sides to hold enough water, diameter not too large. Only a fiver. He buys a foot pump for an extra fiver (above, p239).

This convergence of the commonplace and the shocking attempts to unsettle the reader and convey the characters' experiences.

The disjunctions or disorders enumerated by Luckhurst include temporal discontinuities, repetitions, interruptions and inconsistencies of tense, focalisation or narration. Though I have not purposefully applied any such

disruptions in order to reproduce for the reader stylistic elements considered exemplary of trauma fiction, examination of a crucial passage in which Rosie receives her terminal prognosis reveals that imagination of what it is like for the teenager has resulted in their employment:

It's one of the random doctors, somebody Rosie has met before but no-one special. She sort of looks past Rosie's left eye and says, 'It seems as if the leukaemia is coming back. At the moment there are about thirty per cent blasts apparent. What this means is that we've given you the strongest treatment we've got and it hasn't worked.'

I am tumbling falling away down I don't understand what she's saying Mum takes hold of my hand.

It can't be real because last Monday Mum made pizza and then Rosie went to the ice-cream parlour with Siouxsie and they watched *Madagascar* at the UGC and on Tuesday she went to Ali's party and it felt normal: how life should be. True Dr Baldwin said it looked as if there are some leukaemia cells but she didn't think it was THE END.

THE END

The doctor says, 'There are two options,' which means Rosie has basically two choices, but she can't take it in. The adults are talking but she can't hear because she is stunned.

What is the fucking point?

What was the fucking point of making such a huge effort to be brave think positive get better been too strong for too long I can't why me? I'm falling I can't get up fear in my tummy winter again trapped underground want to run away

The doctor fixes her with a serious stare. At least she is actually looking her in the eyes. 'Rosie, have you got any questions?'

'How long will I live if I don't have any more chemo?'
(10th draft, pp162-163)

The passage evinces characteristic repetition; disjunct movements in the narration, between third person and first person, where I wanted shock to jolt the reader into identification with Rosie's 'I'; interruptions, such as 'THE END,' which are intended to express Rosie's shock and the interruption of her own narrative of her life; and temporal disruption when 'winter again' and 'trapped underground' return Rosie to her experience of radiation sickness. I remain unsure whether I have unconsciously transcribed such techniques from my prior

reading of trauma fiction, or whether imagining the impossibility of incorporation of a traumatic event into a character's psyche results in these linguistic effects.

I have not intentionally set out to conform to an aesthetics of trauma fiction, and yet, particularly at crisis points, I have used techniques that reproduce those discerned by critics in trauma fiction as mimicking subjective experiences of trauma. Whitehead's conclusion that 'it is not necessarily that novelists are reading trauma theory [...] but rather that the rethinking of trauma has been absorbed into the current ideologies of history and memory' (2004, p161) may be useful here.⁴⁵ After all, trauma theory comprises the attempt to establish a set of general principles resulting from the definition of PTSD, which followed from campaigns by war veterans who had experienced trauma. So, since I've imagined and recalled subjective experiences of trauma, and have read previous trauma fiction, it may be hardly surprising that the poetics of my fiction accords to some extent with a posited aesthetics of trauma fiction.

How does this relate to considerations of the ethics of writing trauma?

Ethics of Trauma Fiction: Imagination, Identification, Appropriation

Dominick LaCapra in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001) explicitly deals with the ethics of modes of writing and representation; he focuses primarily on history and testimony, but also considers literature. Throughout his arguments and investigations, he draws a clear distinction between empathy with victims of trauma, which he terms ethical, and identification, which he suggests is clearly unethical, for various reasons. Firstly, identification leads to an avoidance of 'ethical, social and political demands and responsibilities,' because identification involves a denial of difference and an inability to comprehend and respect otherness (2001, pp211-213). He rather briefly considers the relationship between empathy and affect: 'it is important to try to provide an account of why one does or does not find something moving' (p216). LaCapra finds 'works by Franz Kafka, Paul Celan or Charlotte Delbo [...] moving in a manner quite

⁴⁵ Perhaps I also need to invoke Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author': 'a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures [...]' (1977, p148).

different from the Holocaust miniseries or even *The Diary of Anne Frank*,’ and concludes that the topic deserves further study (pp216-217).

These are such huge questions that I nearly left out any reference to LaCapra altogether, but their relevance to ‘Seventeen’ is undeniable. I shall return shortly to issues around identification and recognition of difference, only pausing here to refer to the question of affect and to give one example of a struggle I’ve had while writing. In the final chapter of my novel, narration focalised through Rosie recounts her listening to an excerpt from AA Milne’s *House at Pooh Corner* (1928) (11th draft, pp307-308). I imagined this as a way of showing Rosie’s desire as a dying person for reassurance that she will not be forgotten, while simultaneously reiterating the regression under stress that Rosie herself has recognised earlier (p177, above). I deleted the passage more than once because it seemed to achieve an effect of bathos or sentimentality but then reinserted it because without it the representation of Rosie’s reality seemed lacking.

With regard to identification and trauma, Tal asserts that ‘the writings of trauma survivors comprise a distinct “literature of trauma.” Literature of trauma is defined by the identity of its author’ (1996, p17). Such a claim immediately raises the question: is it ethical for me to write from the point of view of a mixed-race survivor of Kostmann’s Syndrome, who then succumbs to Acute Myeloid Leukaemia, when I am neither classified as mixed race nor a sufferer from blood disorders? The inference that a novelist can empathise with and describe traumatic experiences from the point of view of the sufferer may invite criticism of identification and appropriation rather than appropriate empathy. My own claim is that I am able, with a great deal of effort, to imagine such a point of view; the objections of the friend who has one hand to the exposure, rather than the implausibility, involved in my representation of the behaviour, reactions and consciousness of a character who had one hand, supported my declaration that I can imagine experiences not my own—even while they forced me to reconsider my ethical stance (see Introduction, above, pp248-250). I need to further examine the cultural context of this ethical knot, which I intend to do by summarising one particular article.

Stef Craps, exploring traumatic histories and empathies across cultures in two novels by Caryl Phillips, quotes a scathing review by Hilary Mantel of

Phillips' *Nature of Blood* (1997), which is written from the points of view of Eva, a Holocaust survivor; her uncle; Othello the Moorish general; and Malka, an Ethiopian Jew who moves to Israel. Mantel wrote, 'It is indecent to lay claim to other people's suffering: it is a colonial impulse, dressed up as altruism' (Craps 2008, p196). According to Craps, other critics refuted Mantel's objections, for instance Bénédicte Ledent quoted a review by James Shapiro in *The New York Times* that praised Phillips' refusal to conform to essentialist identity politics. Ledent suggested that a Black writer is criticised for writing across identifications according to stipulations that would not be applied to White authors such as Shakespeare. Craps relates that Anne Whitehead also argued, with regard to Phillips, that 'authorial identity places no restrictions on the fictional or historical imagination' (p196).

Craps recognises that Mantel had voiced 'a legitimate concern,' although she failed 'to fully appreciate the self-reflexiveness of the text she reviews'. Eschewing essentialism himself, he suggests that Phillips makes use of 'textual signs that complicate the pursuit of imaginative identification' (pp196-197). He looks at the narrative sections in the other novel under consideration in his article, Phillips' *Higher Ground* (1989), that present the point of view of Rudy. Rudy relates his experiences to those of Holocaust victims and African-American slaves: 'he regards history as a hall of mirrors, a walk through which affords one endless possibilities for self-recognition' (p197). This crude empathy and appropriation result in an inability to empathise with anyone whose existence he cannot equate with his own. Rudy's narrative is followed by the story of a Polish-Jewish Holocaust survivor. Craps argues that Phillips is using metonymy rather than metaphor, juxtaposition rather than conflation and contiguity not substitution. He draws attention to a divergence between the modes of narration in the three parts of the novel: the first two parts use first-person, present-tense narration that results in immediacy, intimacy and engagement lacking in the third part, which uses third-person retrospective narration. Far from deploring a weakness in imagination or voicing, Craps hypothesises that the author's restraint acknowledges the limits of his own subject position on his imagination of his characters (pp197-199).

Consideration of this single article makes it clear that the representation of a character who belongs to a different cultural category from my own may be

open to criticism and dismissal. I have considered whether, on those grounds, I should describe a child who is White in a White family. My principal objections to such a revision of my work are threefold. In the first place, at an intuitive, emotional level it would seem like a betrayal of my daughter, the only daughter I have ever brought up, who is/was mixed race. In ‘Seventeen,’ I have aimed to give the character, Rosie, my daughter’s childish and adolescent perceptions regarding racist divisions, rather than my own. For example, ‘Rosie knows she isn’t white but she does feel English and most of her friends are white. In fact, why isn’t she white? Why do people have to be black or white, and if they’re mixed then why can’t they choose which they want to be?’ (11th draft, p251). These seemingly naïve questions echo not only Franz Fanon’s affirmation that ‘out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly *white*’ (1986, p63), but also an anecdote quoted by Ifekwunigwe in her book about *métisses* (she prefers the term to mixed-race) women in the UK:

An anthropologist friend of mine tells me the story of a Haitian statesman who was visited by an official from the United States during the 1930s. “What percentage of Haiti’s population is White?” asked the American. “Ninety-five per cent,” came the reply. The American official was flustered and assuming that the Haitian was mistaken exclaimed, “I don’t understand – how on earth do you come up with such a figure?”

‘Well – how do you measure blackness in the United States?’

“Anyone with a black ancestor.”

“Well, that’s exactly how we measure whiteness,” retorted the Haitian (1999, p188).⁴⁶

Any irony pertaining to Rosie’s youth and ignorance should be undermined by the pertinence of her reflections and by her insights and perceptiveness, for example when she wonders, ‘How can Mum be so sensible and grown up about some things but she doesn’t understand about people, like she can’t see that talking to this guy is going to end up somewhere mental?’ (p74, above). I am trying to make the point that although Rosie’s third-person voice evinces teenage silliness, it relates more to the classical role of the *eiron*, in which a character’s

⁴⁶ Ifekwunigwe quotes the anecdote from Patricia J Williams (1997), *Seeing a Color [sic] Blind Future*, Virago, London, p50.

intelligent perceptions are understated, than to irony that assumes superior knowledge in the text's author and reader.

The interdependency of ethics and aesthetics has persisted during the writing of my novel, partly because I have attempted to adhere to the truth of the characters. For example, I changed Rosie's narration at the African-Caribbean Leukaemia Foundation Ball⁴⁷ into the first person precisely because the character felt she belonged:

I realise that I fit right in. Nearly everybody here has a nose that blends into their cheeks rather than jutting out. Most people have hair that grows upwards into curls and stays in place when it's braided rather than hanging down or slipping loose. The women have rounded bottoms and bellies instead of sagging or flat or skinny. Really there's not a lot of difference between people with smooth noses, black hair, brown eyes and rounded bottoms and those who have smooth hair, beaky noses and flat arses, so I've always just got on with it and acted like there's no difference whatsoever. But I've always been on the wrong side of that hardly-any divide, like being the only black girl in the class. Or the one who gets shouted at when I'm staying with Amma and Zelda, Go back to the swamp, which is so stupid it's not worth worrying about. When I was growing up, me and Mum always used to watch *The Cosby Show* and *Fresh Prince*, where the families are really normal-for-TV and well off, not gangstas or rappers or starving Africans, but in Ipswich most of the kids who went to African-Caribbean Saturday school came from quite poor families, and me and my mother used to be poor. My mother's friends who are black like Vonnelle and Sharon are poor rather than well off like Siouxsie or even Mel. So in spite of being tired it's a brilliant feeling, like there's an entire world of possibilities where I fit right in. I can go to balls and pay a thousand pounds for an African figurine and people will like me and I won't have to worry about sliding into Losers' Limbo. I feel at home instead of being the odd one out. Even if there's no handsome prince to ask me to dance, I've found myself (11th draft, pp62-63).

This passage not only recognises a difference in identifications that are possible/desirable for the mother and daughter—and thus gives its due to historical divisions between 'races'—but also reveals a UK teenager's materialistic values in 2004. Recognition of the historical divisions between Black and White women entails comprehension of brutalities, struggles,

⁴⁷ Cited above in relation to the synecdoche of skin colour.

achievements, alliances and disregard that are too complex to abridge here. In ‘Seventeen’ I am presenting three particular characters in particular circumstances: my allegiance to my daughter presses me to articulate her opinions as Rosie’s—because I can, while she cannot: not only because I am alive, but because I have worked at writing. At a stage of composition when I was wondering about the ethics of presenting the point of view of a gravely-ill teenager categorised as Black, and speculating that it might be better left to such a teenager, I read an unpublished memoir by a hospital acquaintance who succumbed to AIDS. This extraordinary, brave, positive young man wrote in the most conventional, generalised, abstract way, without the use of narrative and poetic strategies to make his tale vivid or distinct; the narrative told me practically nothing about this particular teenager, his experiences or the texture of his life.

I’ll return to my reasons for deciding not to change Rosie into a White teenager. In the second place, I could build an argument for my ability to write a mixed-race character that would be based on my authorial experiences, observations and reading that relate to the aforementioned brutalities, struggles, achievements, alliances and disregard. I myself, this argument would run, have lived in mixed-heritage families since the age of four. As a child, I uttered racist epithets but as an adult campaigned and worked to end racism in institutional, professional and personal contexts. I have studied and taught anti-imperialist texts alongside poems and fiction by Black writers from a variety of backgrounds. Affirmation of the authority of experience remains an ethical requirement for writers such as Tal, quoted at the start of this section; Tal delineates her own experience of trauma in her critical work on trauma fiction, and appears to equate trauma fiction with trauma testimony. But as bell hooks affirms in *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1995), ‘solidarity does not need to be rooted in shared experience. It can be based on one’s political and ethical understanding of racism and one’s rejection of domination’ (1996, p152).

Finally, I need to enquire how Rosie’s cultural heritage departs from her White mother’s in ‘Seventeen’. Having reflected on how the person of African heritage is made Black (‘Negro,’ or another epithet beginning with n that I refuse to write) by the fears, gaze and appellation of Whites, Fanon declares that ‘a normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become

abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world' (1986, p143). What does this imply for the Black child who grows up in a White family? At a workshop for mixed families in Bristol in 1992, I met a woman of European heritage who had given birth to a son whose father was a Nigerian student; the father returned to Nigeria and the woman lost contact with him; the boy's White family, insisted the woman, treated the boy as if there was no difference at all [—no difference, but sameness]; the boy finished school and attended university, but after he left university he encountered racism and committed suicide. Rosie, the protagonist of 'Seventeen,' grows up in a White family but associates with a few Black as well as a majority of White friends; she learns about racism at an early age, learns about heroes who fought racism, attends African-Caribbean Saturday School and believes racism is stupid; in her favourite novel, Malorie Blackman's *Noughts and Crosses* (2001), the history of racism in the UK is reversed so that people of African heritage are privileged and discriminate against those of European ancestry. Her White mother, who works in Racial Harassment Prevention, is aware of racist incidents and murders about which she does not speak to her daughter because her daughter has enough problems already. Their cultural context only differs in the treatment, attitudes and behaviours to which Rosie is subject because of perceptions that assign her to a racialised category. Yet this categorisation affects her profoundly, as I intend to demonstrate in the next section (see p312, below).

Finally—again— on the topic of identification, appropriation and imagination, I find myself in agreement with Margaret Atwood, whom I would like to quote at length:

I've recently heard it argued that writers should tell stories only from a point of view that is their own, or that of a group to which they themselves belong. Writing from the point of view of someone 'other' is a form of poaching, the appropriation of material you haven't earned and to which you have no right. Men, for instance, should not write as women; although it's less frequently said that women should not write as men.

This view is understandable but, in the end, self-defeating. Not only does it condemn as thieves and impostors such writers as George Eliot, James Joyce, Emily Brontë and William Faulkner [...]; it is also inhibiting to the imagination in a fundamental way. It's only a short step from saying we can't write from the point of view of an 'other' to

saying we can't read that way either, and from there to the position that no-one can really understand anyone else, so we might as well stop trying [...] Surely the delight and wonder come not from who tells the story but from what the story tells, and how (2009, pp110-111).

If ethics involves a fundamental recognition of the existence and rights of others, then fiction that works to imagine the experiences of others in a considered manner, that does not attempt to sensationalise but to innovate and articulate imagination in a manner appropriate to the author's aims and the cultural context, must be ethical. However, articulation and aims imply rational conscious intention, while I also need to consider unconscious motives and effects.

Metaphor, Metonymy and the Unconscious:

At this point, I intend to consider the role of the unconscious in the trauma suffered by my characters, in my writing of it, and in the challenges posed by how to represent it. Although a number of the critics of trauma fiction cited above refer to Freud's conception of *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness or deferral) (eg Caruth 1995, Whitehead 2004, pp17-18), none specifically relates a more general characterisation of the unconscious to psychic trauma. However, my understanding of the unconscious—whether brought to bear at the time of writing, or recognised retrospectively; however crude or simplistic—has had a profound influence on my novel's treatment of traumatic experiences. I'm not asserting here that my interpretation is correct, or that it has any significance for what Hortense Spillers, in relation to psychoanalysis, proposes as 'a reinvigorated social practice, whose aim is ethical and restorative' (1996, p75), but simply that it has affected the composition of this novel.

Returning to Freud's deductions concerning unconscious systems, I mean to take another look at what author and protagonists don't know before considering the challenge of presenting the unconscious processes of characters through narration that focalises their consciousness. Freud deduced that dream-work carried out impressive feats of condensation, or compression, while at the same time displacing psychical intensity onto subordinate elements. I shall revisit a literary-critical moment that compared metaphor to condensation and

metonymy to displacement, and conclude by wondering whether certain kinds of writing may invoke associations with unconscious rather than conscious knowledge.

In spite of the absence of the unconscious from much cultural trauma theory that I've read, I find in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) two extended quotations from Freud that link trauma and repression into the unconscious. The first names pathological symptoms as residues of emotional experiences, wounds inflicted by traumatic scenes; 'it was no longer necessary to regard them as arbitrary and enigmatic effects of the neurosis'. In the second quotation, Freud explains how expulsion of the trauma from consciousness takes place in order to save the patient from suffering, and yet the repressed trauma 'is on watch constantly for an opportunity to make itself known'; it reappears in consciousness in an effective, complete disguise that nevertheless 'surrounds itself with all the morbidity that had been supposedly averted by the repression' (Freud, quoted by Fanon 1986, pp143-144).⁴⁸ I find it helpful to conceive of emotional and mental distress not as inexplicable and without cause but as related to causes that may be uncovered.

But first, a summary of the unconscious as I understand it: Freud himself was aware that the predominance of unconscious processes was controversial. At the beginning of a series of lectures that composed a general introduction to psychoanalysis for lay listeners, he observed that 'the first of [the] displeasing assertions of psychoanalysis is this, that the psychic processes are in themselves unconscious, and that those which are conscious are merely isolated acts and parts of the total psychic life' (1920, p7). He surmised the workings of the unconscious, which remain in the normal course of things inaccessible to consciousness, from the effectiveness of hypnotic suggestion, as well as from resistance, repulsion, neurotic symptoms, jokes, slips of the tongue, forgetfulness, errors and lapses in speech or thought, and from dreams. He observed that the unconscious displays characteristics lacking in conscious and preconscious processes. These include: the existence of incompatible, instinctual impulses side by side, without mutual influence or contradiction; the absence of

⁴⁸ I refer to Fanon here for two reasons, the first being that the authoritative Martiniquais psychiatrist and theorist does not supply references to page or volume, and the second that Fanon's own writing is among that which has affected my thought.

negation; the operation of primary processes of condensation and displacement (of which more below); the absence of time, and of any alteration by the passage of time; and the absence of any reference to external reality, which is replaced by psychic reality (1991, pp159-161).

Following Freud, Jacques Lacan observed succinctly that ‘the unconscious is that chapter of my history that is marked by a blank or occupied by a falsehood: it is the censored chapter’. He further argued that ‘the truth can be rediscovered; usually it has already been written down elsewhere’. He lists the locations in which this truth may be deciphered: archival documents, which may be childhood memories; monuments, which may be symptoms in the flesh; traditions and legends; ‘and, lastly, in the traces that are inevitably preserved by the distortions necessitated by the linking of the adulterated chapter to the chapters surrounding it’ (1995, p50).

Before I reflect on how I transcribed these characteristics of unconscious processes in ‘Seventeen,’ I need to acknowledge their operation in myself as its author, in spite of the slight humiliation involved in admitting to my own unconscious processes as if I were not an autonomous, rational adult. It may also be incumbent on me to acknowledge the limitations of my understanding of mourning and melancholia, introjection and incorporation. Only becoming aware in retrospect of unprecedented and unintentional behaviour, I realise that writing from the point of view of a teenager with leukaemia has comprised part of an unconscious process of coping with the loss of what psychoanalysis calls ‘an object’: a process that has consisted of either incorporation or introjection (incorporation being viewed as pathological). In summary, this behaviour began with walking or cycling past my daughter’s school, feeling happiest spending time with her friends and preferring the books and TV programmes she preferred; it continued with writing fiction in the first person, from the point of view of a teenager with leukaemia, that was published or won prizes,⁴⁹ reacting very critically to other writers’ teenage voices that seemed to me inaccurate in

⁴⁹ Eg: ‘Leaving Home’ won first prize in an international competition and was published in Writing Magazine (Oct 2007); ‘Nobody Could’ won first prize in the Ilkley Literature Festival competition 2008; ‘Deep Blue’ was published in The London Magazine (Dec/Jan 2009/10); ‘What Will Be and What Was’ was selected for Meniscus (journal of the Australasian Association of Writing Programmes) 1:1 (2013).

terms of register, and writing this novel, 'Seventeen'. Distinctions made between incorporation and introjection in relation to melancholia and mourning by psychoanalytic theorists Nicolas Abraham and Mária Török elucidate obscurities—for me, at least. 'Incorporation is the refusal to acknowledge the full import of the loss,' a denial of the loss that takes metaphor as literal, while introjection describes methods of coping with the loss: 'learning to fill the emptiness of the mouth with words is the initial model for introjection' (1994, pp127-128). While I admire parents of dead children who, for instance, establish orphanages for sick children in parts of the world without social security, it seems I am only capable of the project of filling emptiness with words. Abraham and Török's explanation of verbalisation as a method of coping also makes sense in relation to ideas around the unspeakability of trauma, and the notion of narrative memory as healing, referred to above (p292).

Having made a brief admission of my own unconscious investment, I want to move on to the challenges of presenting the unconscious of the protagonists of 'Seventeen'. One of my initial methods has been to elaborate Rosie's childhood memories, recollections from childhood being named by Lacan among the locations in which to discover the unconscious. I began with those in which psychic reality completely replaces external reality, for instance in Rosie's infantile understanding that she has a good mother and a snake mother: this articulates the normal paranoid-schizoid process of splitting and projection discerned in infants by Melanie Klein (1946), exacerbated and prolonged by Rosie's experience of painful medical interventions.

Up from hell arrives another mother, who at first seems the same as the one I know. In the dark the hell mother changes into a snake that hisses. The other mother carries me to a strange land where she forsakes me among strangers. The other mother turns the first mother's milk so bitter I can't drink (11th draft, p37).

It appears to be a normal part of development for psychic reality to dominate external reality during infancy.

Rosie's unconscious conflicts and motivations are also revealed by behaviour that does not conform to the logic of self-interest, as are those of the other two family members. In Rosie's case, irrational behaviour is limited by her emotional maturity and ability to articulate rather than act out. However, I wrote

her as acting out of alignment with the usual mental mechanisms—in conformity with a definition of psychic trauma, that cannot be assimilated according to the usual mental mechanisms — by cutting herself (p243), which I understood as an unconscious incorporation of anger at lack of control and independence, and also (or instead) as a repetition of multiple wounds inflicted by members of the medical profession as they tried to save her life on more than one occasion. The other occasion on which she reacts according to unconscious rather than conscious motivations is after receiving her terminal prognosis, when she slashes the faces of the Black models whose photographs are hidden on the inside of her cupboard door (p167). At this point she avoids self-harm but revisits an identification with Black women that gave her pleasure earlier in the novel, when she attended the African Caribbean Leukaemia Foundation ball (pp63-64). Now she wants to reject a factor in her identity that makes her different from her friends: ‘Rosie thought slavery days were over and it’s time to move on up but she might as well be a fucking slave as tortured with poisons and chemicals and radiation’. Her thoughts here align with Hortense Spillers’ hypothesis that the Atlantic slave trade, with its brutal marking of bodies and its attempts to abolish language, constitutes the founding trauma for subjects of African heritage in the New World (1996, p140). Rosie’s acting out suggests her unconscious at work, while her conscious thoughts indicate awareness of layers of pain that have external causes.

Mel and Jay, too, behave in ways that undermine their self-interest and their commitment to each other, more so as the novel progresses and their stress accumulates. My dissatisfaction with the textual rapprochements in other fictional families endangered by leukaemia made me want to detail the parents’ destructive tendencies. Reading about unconscious processes frequently invoked by the care of a dying child confirmed my belief that their behaviour, though irrational, was plausible and comprehensible when, for example, in the eleventh draft, Jay deleted a phone message because she believed it to be from Cara (11th draft, p239) or Mel felt surprised at his own lack of control when he kicked the coal bucket and shouted at Jay (p242). It struck me as terrible to write, from Mel’s point of view, ‘if [Jay] weren’t such a drama queen, Rosa might not be so ill’ (p211), and, in narration focalised through Jay, ‘stress makes illness worse so maybe if Mel hadn’t split up with Jay, Rosie wouldn’t have developed

leukaemia' (p241). In both cases, these speculations epitomise an unconscious process detailed by Dorothy Judd in her psychoanalytic/ psychotherapeutic study of working with a dying child. 'Negative feelings about the dying person, or about that which they conjure up or reflect in our own inner world – feelings of helplessness, damage, anger – are completely denied by seeing all good in the dying person'; such negative feelings, having been split away from feelings judged good such as love, must then be projected onto another person or object (1995, p15). Although she is describing health-care workers rather than parents, Judd's observation confirms the psychological realism of Rosie's mother's and step-father's idealisation of their daughter and projection of feelings of persecution onto the other figure in the family triad, in a paranoid-schizoid process which destroys their relationship. This splitting and projection echoes the division made by Rosie as an infant, in the preludes to chapters, between the good and bad breasts/the angel mother and the snake mother.

Of course, my challenge is not only to describe behaviour that a reader may deduce to have unconscious motivations because it conforms to a logic that bears little relation to the external reality of the world of the novel, but also to evoke the unconscious. I have arrived at a strategy of suggesting permeation of external reality by the protagonists' psychic reality through a use of metaphor and metonymy that relates to Freud's deductions about the unconscious, in particular primary processes of condensation and displacement.

A brief introduction to condensation and displacement in dreams may be useful at this point. In many of his own dreams, as well as in those related to him by others, Freud notices a dissimilarity between the explicit content and the latent thoughts that motivated them: 'the dream-work is particularly fond of representing two contrary ideas by the same composite structure'; he gives the example of a spray of large white flowers, that (within a European scheme of symbolism) suggest innocence, while simultaneously connoting La Dame aux Camélias and the opposite of innocence (because the camellia lady is a courtesan) (1991, p98). Freud concludes that 'what we have learned about condensation in dreams may be summarised by this formula: each element in the content of a dream is "overdetermined" by material in the dream-thoughts; it is not derived from a single element in the dream-thoughts, but may be traced back to a whole number'. Along with this compression of latent thoughts into dream

images, Freud also noticed that the boldest and clearest dramatic elements or images in the dream-content might, after analysis, be discovered to have only the smallest role among the dream-thoughts, while the essential dream-thought might manifest as an indistinct element, alluded to in passing. He argued that dreams are never instigated by matters indifferent to the dreamer, even though displacement, which substitutes trivial impressions from the day for pressing wishes, desires or fears, may make it seem so. In summary, condensation condenses a number of dream-thoughts, or instigating factors, into a single image or element, while displacement displaces the dreamer's vital issues onto trivial, insignificant components of the dream. I want to explore the relevance of condensation and displacement in relation to the unconscious processes of characters and to metaphor and metonymy rather than to dreams.

It was Lacan who equated metaphor with condensation and metonymy with displacement. "‘Condensation,’" he said, 'is the structure of the superimposition of the signifiers, which metaphor takes as its field,' while displacement 'is closer to the idea of that veering off of signification that we see in metonymy, and which from its first appearance in Freud is represented as the most appropriate means used by the unconscious to foil censorship' (1995, p160). Before I look at my attempts to show the unconscious psychic processes of my protagonists through the use of metaphor and metonymy, I need to briefly revisit my definitions of the terms (see above, pp280-281).

Metaphor is of course a trope, turn, or figure of thought in which a word or expression which literally denotes one thing or action is applied to a dissimilar thing or action, without making a comparison explicit; for example: 'you are my sunshine'. Metonymy may be recognised when the term that denotes one thing is applied to another with which it is closely associated or contiguous; for example, 'on the distaff side' would be understood as referring to women because of the assumption that spinning was a woman's occupation. Various critics have remarked on the difficulties in distinguishing one of these tropes from the other, and in relation to an analogy between metonymy and displacement on the one hand, and metaphor and condensation on the other, I'd like to remark that Freud observed how frequently condensation and displacement work together in dreams. In practice, at this point in my exploration, an insistence on clear distinctions seems neither useful nor relevant.

When I search through my novel, it's much easier to find examples that combine metonymy and metaphor, with the intention of hinting at a character's unconscious processes, than to discover separate instances. For example, in the second chapter, while they're waiting to see the haematologist at Great Ormond Street Hospital, the teenage protagonist, Rosie,

leans against her mother. 'I want to do Psychology A level, except it seems really cruel when they do those experiments.'

'When they make people treat each other badly?'

'No, like on animals. Miss Younger told us about one where they took baby monkeys away from their mothers and put them in a cage with a wire mother that gave food and a cloth mother that didn't provide any food. All the baby monkeys got attached to the mother they could cuddle, even though people thought feeding was the basis for the mother-infant bond. Some of the monkeys they put with only a wire mother, and when those monkeys had babies, they didn't know how to look after them. But if one of them had a second baby, she looked after it all right. She learned how to be a mother from her baby.'

'I'm exactly like that. I learned how to be a mother from you.' Her mother rubs her cheek against Rosie's hair (11th draft, p21).

The experiment with the monkeys is intended to have really existed at some place and time within the fictional world, but becomes closely associated with Jay. The mother's identification with the damaged monkey avoids the censorship that wishes to deny that she feels too damaged ever to be an effective mother. The metonymy could be read in various ways, so I imagine it involves condensation as well as displacement. It can be understood as rhetoric that conflates a woman of European heritage, who has pinky-grey skin, with a monkey, and thus contradicts racist stereotypes that have equated characters of African heritage with animals;⁵⁰ as implying that effective mothering is learned, rather than innate behaviour; or as a sign of the life-changing importance to the mother, Jay, of having learned how to look after her child.

Another example of metonymy in 'Seventeen' evolved intuitively in the writing, when I began to realise how many tropes related to water. Throughout my novel, water figures more or less discretely or prominently, from the mention

⁵⁰ See, for instance Morrison 1993, p68.

of a harbour—that connotes safety—and of the waters of Zion in the first chapter, to a current that sweeps the child away in the last.

To demonstrate, I'll choose a scene in which the stepfather takes part in a sub-aqua dive, on holiday in the Caribbean:

It's like being an astronaut, because Mel has travelled to a new world and also because he's free to move through dimensions: as well as left or right, forwards or backwards, he can swim upwards and downwards. Maybe he could slip back through time to be twenty-five again[....]

The current operates like a conveyor belt; it floats them slowly along one side of the reef. The corals are amazing. Out of this world. Coral like green fingers, coral like orange fungus growing out of a dead tree, coral like a cluster of tiny brown volcanoes, like bouquets of blue and mauve flowers. Gorgonians, which he hasn't seen before: species of soft coral that flourish into pink and orange fans and branches (11th draft, pp254-255).

The freedom and beauty of the sea exist within the world of the novel, and also, contiguous with the stepfather, Mel, convey his desire for exploration and freedom. In the following chapter, Mel, visiting Rosie in hospital, notices, in contrast, 'fish in the corridor that live out their entire lifespans in a glass tank that measures a third of a metre by a metre and contains pebbles and plastic weed: an approximation of a life' (p276). But Mel's dive beneath the sea also symbolises the importance to him of the flow and freedom of sexuality.

Up until the eleventh draft, Mel was born with an unusual hand, that hardly developed beyond the wrist. In the course of his observations on the formation of symptoms, Freud connects 'a hand cut off at the wrist' with the castration complex, and, talking about the formation of neurotic symptoms, refers to the story of Strewelpeter, who had his thumbs cut off as a punishment for sucking (1991, p549). I changed this characteristic for ethical reasons, attributing the bullying suffered by Mel as a child instead to his having had red hair, worn unusually long for a boy; bullying against people with red hair appears to be particularly ubiquitous and prevalent in the UK.⁵¹ I altered Mel's unease about virility to anxiety associated with his erection at the age of fourteen, an age when boys often become obsessed with genital sex: 'he could

⁵¹ Maybe because of historical power relations in which Romans and Normans, for example, attempted to dominate Celts and Scots, the populations with the highest incidence of red hair.

see that their erections pointed towards their navels while his aimed at the floor' (11th draft, p227). Other characters within my novel remark on Mel's excessive need for sexual attention from women, but his drives and anxieties are only explicitly connected with childhood memories at this point. The memory is contiguous with the appearance of the sea in the setting, even though his home is nowhere near the sea: 'The roaring of waves in a high wind fills his ears. He can picture them racing in, white horses dimly visible in the black night. Of course it's not the sea. Must be traffic on the West End Road' (p227).

The association of sexuality and the sea is made during sex scenes, for example in the second chapter, in Mel and Jay's first sexual encounter within the narrative, 'she's already wet. She tastes like the sea. When he slides a finger inside, her vagina encloses it as a sea anemone grips his finger when he explores a rock pool' (p29, above). Mel's fears of dryness in a relationship also figure the conflation of sexuality with water through antinomy. Writing sex scenes in a novel about a family entails various dangers, one being the tendency of sex scenes to alienate the reader or to be clichéd, embarrassing or overdone, while another consists in the preclusion by such scenes of a young teenage readership. I have purposely omitted to write about sex from Rosie's point of view, apart from a few desires, a kiss and one mention of a 'little button' (p180, above); even though, as Judd notes, increased masturbation may constitute one reaction among teenagers to life-threatening illness (1995, p67). Again, my decision relates to ethical considerations regarding intrusiveness, exposure, prurience and limits to where my imagination should take me. However, physical and sexual intimacy—or its absence—between the mother and stepfather seemed vital to their relationship and its deterioration under stress. I'm interested in showing the tensions in sexual encounters between adult desires and competencies on the one hand and vulnerability and the revelation of unconscious anxieties and desires from infancy on the other. I suppose that what I feel tentative about is how to convey these ideas without either overstatement, or excessive subtlety that makes the connections too obscure.

I'll look at how water figures another character. In sections narrated from the third-person point of view of Jay, the mother, water has contradictory—contrary—meanings. In one scene, Jay explicitly says to Rosie that she's always happy at the beach. On holiday in Spain, at the zenith of the novel's story arc,

she feels wholeness and transcendence while swimming in the sea. But on the day when Rosie's leukaemia diagnosis is confirmed, Jay's narration refers to the threat of flooding from rain swelling the stream that runs under the street where she and Rosie live. And during the course of the scene where she tells Rosie she's always happy beside the sea, what she knows about the past of the location connotes death rather than bliss:

She turns and walks back. The sea is a dark colour in between grey and blue, the foam very white even though clouds cover the sun. Not far up the coast the sea flooded in and buried the capital city of East Anglia under water and silt, eight hundred years ago houses, farms, churches and a hospital were all drowned, she hopes that mothers and fathers and children, bakers and brewers, farmers and nuns had time to leave before the deluge. People still claim they can hear the church bells ringing (p69, 11th draft).

Jay doesn't consciously make this connection, because of the way in which death is often unacceptable to conscious thoughts, but it appears more than once, and finally in the last chapter. In a passage that is again focalised through Jay, 'shadows gather in the corners of the room, a trickle and gurgle sound in the shadows as though the brook that runs under the street has flooded' (p309).

Jay's fears, rather than dryness, revolve around freezing and isolation. They have more direct connections with the unconscious through a dream that's narrated during the period in which Rosie lies gravely ill with radiation sickness following her radiotherapy. In a passage focalised through the mother:

Every day during November a white fog creeps up from the docks and presses round the house. [...] The white cold reminds Jay of a nightmare she used to have as a child, in which she and her family huddled on an iceberg. The ice where Jay was standing would break away from the ice with her mother, father and sister on it, the current would carry her iceberg away from her family's iceberg, she called out but none of them could hear (11th draft, p123).

Again, as with Mel's perceptions of water in various forms, this trope of ice is woven through the book.

These are tropes, or turns in meaning, in which the literal meaning of an element in the narrative can represent more than one contrary idea in a character's thoughts: metaphor, or the primary process of condensation. And in which an essential matter for a character—of which they may not be consciously

aware—can be displaced onto a seemingly insignificant component of the narrative: metonymy or displacement. Again, I must insist that I am not theorising insights or comprehension with regard to psychoanalytic theory, but simply struggling to explore how to describe unconscious processes in my protagonists without prescriptive explanations. The use of multivalent metaphor and metonymy, I hope, may resonate with ways that a reader's unconscious attempts to reveal itself in dreams, and thus connote the unconscious of characters.

I began this chapter by looking at aesthetic elements of the novel that reflect symptoms of traumatic stress; aesthetics here responds to an ethical requirement for truth to character. Considering imagination, empathy and identification, I suggested that it's possible, with work and commitment, to write from a point of view removed from my own. I've tried to emphasise the importance of unconscious processes to my imagination of characters who endure traumatic experiences, and to explain my attempts to reveal their unconscious fears and desires, splits and projections through the use of rhetorical figures that reflect the polyvalence of dreams. It only remains for me to recapitulate my conclusions concerning ethics and aesthetics in relation to my novel, 'Seventeen,' and to the question that revolves around truth, kindness and the form of the novel.

Conclusion

My research question enquires into the relationship between truth, kindness and the form of the novel. Because writing fiction does not directly affect the wellbeing of others, it becomes easy to avoid considering my imagination as agency or responsibility. Because the relationship between truth and kindness may seem more urgent in relation to life-and-death situations than to writing, I'm going to quote from my reading around the deaths of children. A consultant oncologist, interviewed by Dorothy Judd on the topic of working with teenagers, considers his responsibilities together with the rights of children and parents in relation to cancer diagnoses and terminal prognoses:

I don't believe there is such a thing as a guiding principle, in an absolute sense, in any aspect of truth telling, because as soon as you start talking about principles, there are principles which immediately contravene each other. For example, there is a principle that you shouldn't hurt people or make people needlessly unhappy, and there is a principle that you should tell the truth. These are often mutually contradictory. Truth is one principle, the aim of giving happiness and comfort is another. In the end principles dissolve in the face of a rather messy situation which you just try to sort out the best you can, like all human relations (in Judd 1995, p51).

I have quoted Professor Souhami because although he expresses an urgent tension between truth and kindness as they concern human relations rather than writing, he captures that tension and its specificity in relation to circumstances exactly.

I am aware that both my novel and also this critical reflection are stretched in different directions by other tensions that are not fully articulated: between 'normality' and 'abnormality'; between conscious and unconscious; between the illusion of reality and real life, for example. I think of knowledge as attention and exploration rather than mastery, but even here there's a contradiction between taking the chances of the world and striving for excellence. The forces drawing the novel into equilibrium or imbalance are of course not only ethical but aesthetic. 'What's this novel about?' asks Zadie Smith on the topic of *NW* (2012). 'My books don't seem to me to be about

anything other than the people in them and the sentences used to construct them [...] what I really wanted to do was create people in language'.⁵² What I have tried to do in 'Seventeen' is create Rosie, Mel and Jay in language, giving due consideration to cadence, rhythm, syntax, grammar, vocabulary, structure and the use of rhetorical figures.

I have tried to use plain words, common in everyday speech, appropriate to expressing the stuff of ordinary life, rather than beautiful, extraordinary ones. Adherence to verisimilitude interests me at the moment because reality seems more surprising, wonderful and awful than anything I could invent; articulating the excess of reality over convention or expectation, imagining the world as it is, strikes me as a challenge as great as that of imagining a new world. Ethics and aesthetics are inextricable one from the other: the truth I want to tell is not separate from the effort and words used to write it.

⁵² In an article 'on the inspiration behind NW', *Review* section, *Saturday Guardian* 03.08.13, p5.

Appendix A: An example of unconventional layout of Rosie's narrative (7th chapter, 3rd draft).

I'm drowning	in a dark river
edged with fire	roaring louder
than the fire	helicopter dangles a rope
scream and grab	grinding buzz
hurts my head	please don't
bang hammer drill	saw grind smash
I am sick I am asleep I nearly died	
I need to sleep	
Mum is doing her sitting	
I pee quietly	
I tug her blanket over me	
she kisses me	
hasn't brushed her teeth	
rice left out too long	
did the drilling wake you?	
we hibernate	living underground
everything dark	flashes of light
lemon and ginger tea	one penicillin one acyclovir
read <i>Jane Eyre</i>	or plan my kitten
or my room makeover	from Magic Wand
or Hot Men Who Want to Date you	in my hospital magazine

The Friendly One likes	women with healthy hair
rules me out no hair at all	The Creative One
looks too goofy The Sporty One	wants a tall woman
I won't grow any more	after Total Body Irradiation
I'll never have children	women without children
Mum's and Mel's friends	have better cars and houses
more holidays	The Sexy One
looks a bit creepy with vampire teeth	
I'd pick The Sensitive One	
he's laughing and looks kind	
attracted by woman's voices	
everyone says I have a gorgeous voice	
sex should take forever the closeness	
I'll never have sex at this rate	
Joe's going out with Lara now	
I'm so over him	more important things
don't want a guy	I want a cat a kitten
Mum said get a book	out the library but germs
bacteria and viruses	gross scabby diseases on pages
toast and domperidone	outside the window laughing
on their way to school	I feel so left out
me?	Why

worse than drilling in my bones

head stuffed with dirty

bandages

trapped underground in the dark

while my mates walk to school

they talk about boys

getting Saturday jobs

Mum, can we get a kitten?

I'm at home all day

Dr Stuart said I couldn't

get my ears pierced

Mum let me anyway

I couldn't go to Bonfire Night

might stand next to somebody with chicken pox

fatal I'm old enough to decide for myself

drink two litres a day so the drugs

don't knacker my kidneys

she says studies show watching comedy

boosts your immune system

worries about me watching *Buffy*

drilling starts up again noisy neighbours

don't want to do a heart meditation

it makes me feel angry

prefer my *Little Book of Utter Crap*

Feel your heart beating

with love and safety. Let your heart

grow as big as a night club

Invite all your friends in for a party

Make sure you have bouncers

so when your mates get pissed and

vomit

on the dance floor, the bouncers can

throw them out ha ha ha ha ha

I'll make myself do homework

then search kitten care plan my

room

song on the radio like real

life

waiting in the queue at the chippy

sometimes they're funny

sitting on the sofa roaching a spliff

the guy with the high voice

sings how the ashtray needs emptying

my life's not normal

I don't want to smoke or take drugs Tom says that other one's

about doing Es

kittens make me laugh

good for my immune system

the worst thing that ever happened to me

when we had to get rid of Daisy

no possibility of taking a walk that day

I'm always the last going wait for me

like translating from Spanish

humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority

do my mouth care don't get dressed

this table shows the number of hours ten students

Mum is writing a list

she goes apple *app-ul* a-*pull*

don't go I'll miss you

even for half an hour I love her

so much I'll do something she likes

Let's go for a walk, later

one ranitidine one cyclosporine

gives me a glass of fizzy

water

she gives me a big hug

my tutor will be here soon

it's a pleasure treasure

I love you, Mum

Appendix B: Seventeen (Persephone and Demeter: initial prose piece).

Before I was old enough for yesterday or tomorrow, I had two mothers. One poked tubes in me and tortured me with needles. The other cuddled me on her knee and sang to me the rhythms of my pulse. With my hand as yellow and purple as winter pansies I grabbed for the locket that bounced in time with her heartbeat.

The underworld is no place for a toddler. The good mother fetched me back home, where I practised with bandages, syringes and a broken stethoscope.

I grew my nails and painted them the colour of cherry blossom. When I forced them between the edges of my mother's locket, the polish got dented. Inside was laughter. I fastened the locket round my own neck. It's the thing I love most, to laugh. I don't want to be special because I'm this girl who spends half the year in hell. I want my friends. Five of us flop on the grass next to the tennis courts to get a bit of sun on our bellies. When it goes behind a cloud we tug our shirts back down and sit up to watch the fit boys. Lie down, sit up. Down, up. Good way to tone our abs.

I strip the varnish from my nails and paint them the pink of fuchsia flowers. The women who are not my mother are hanging blood. The room smells like vodka and cranberry juice. It makes me wish I was at home whizzing cosmopolitans in the blender. The plastic mattress cover makes me sweat. Too bruised to hold my mother's hand, I clutch her finger. My mother is morning toast dripping butter and honey, poisoned blood that runs dark in my veins, petals turning brown.

The pain gets too much for me. It wears a hole, as drops of water cut through stone. Morphine, although it makes me forget, moment to moment, doesn't blunt the chisels that gouge my bones.

'I need to go now,' I say.

'I'll keep you company.'

Dragging the drip stand with the wonky wheel, we squeak down the corridor towards darkness.

When we reach the monster that guards the worlds' divide, my mother rips out her own heart and bites it into chunks. She tosses one to each salivating mouth. She pretends that it doesn't hurt. She smells of dark earth. I can't feel her heart beating any more, as we walk. The rush of water grows louder.

I tell you all, you who are listening, your death is inside you. My silver locket won't deflect a bullet because there is no bullet. I am only seventeen. I have two coats of varnish on my nails. I've been here before, but a toddler has no fear. The river runs dark and fast.

'I don't want you to be frightened. I'll come with you,' says my mother.

I dip my toe. The water burns and sticks like ice in the freezer when I make cocktails. My pink nail varnish vanishes under the dark water. 'What d'you mean?'

'I'll come with you if you want.'

The water gleams soft and black as blood, not hard and white like the freezer. 'That's horrible,' I say. 'I'd be a murderer.' The icy water numbs my ankle. Before I wade in, while I can still feel my hands, I undo the locket that lies too heavy against my chest. There's no room for laughter this close to death. I put part of my heart in the locket along with the laughter. I kiss my mother's cheek. She's crap at fiddly things, so I fasten the chain round her neck.

Appendix C: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

In 2000, the American Psychiatric Association revised the PTSD diagnostic criteria in the fourth edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR)(1). The diagnostic criteria (A-F) are specified below.

Diagnostic criteria for PTSD include a history of exposure to a traumatic event meeting two criteria and symptoms from each of three symptom clusters: intrusive recollections, avoidant/numbing symptoms, and hyper-arousal symptoms. A fifth criterion concerns duration of symptoms and a sixth assesses functioning.

Criterion A: stressor

The person has been exposed to a traumatic event in which both of the following have been present:

1. The person has experienced, witnessed, or been confronted with an event or events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others.
2. The person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror. Note: in children, it may be expressed instead by disorganized or agitated behavior.

Criterion B: intrusive recollection

The traumatic event is persistently re-experienced in at least **one** of the following ways:

1. Recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event, including images, thoughts, or perceptions. Note: in young children, repetitive play may occur in which themes or aspects of the trauma are expressed.
2. Recurrent distressing dreams of the event. Note: in children, there may be frightening dreams without recognizable content
3. Acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring (includes a sense of reliving the experience, illusions, hallucinations, and dissociative flashback episodes, including those that occur upon awakening or when intoxicated). Note: in children, trauma-specific re-enactment may occur.
4. Intense psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event.
5. Physiologic reactivity upon exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event

Criterion C: avoidant/numbing

Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness (not present before the trauma), as indicated by at least **three** of the following:

1. Efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the trauma
2. Efforts to avoid activities, places, or people that arouse recollections of the trauma
3. Inability to recall an important aspect of the trauma
4. Markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities

5. Feeling of detachment or estrangement from others
6. Restricted range of affect (e.g., unable to have loving feelings)
7. Sense of foreshortened future (e.g., does not expect to have a career, marriage, children, or a normal life span)

Criterion D: hyper-arousal

Persistent symptoms of increasing arousal (not present before the trauma), indicated by at least **two** of the following:

1. Difficulty falling or staying asleep
2. Irritability or outbursts of anger
3. Difficulty concentrating
4. Hyper-vigilance
5. Exaggerated startle response

Criterion E: duration

Duration of the disturbance (symptoms in B, C, and D) is more than one month.

Criterion F: functional significance

The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

Specify if:

Acute: if duration of symptoms is less than three months

Chronic: if duration of symptoms is three months or more

Specify if:

With or Without delay onset: Onset of symptoms at least six months after the stressor

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1. American Psychiatric Association. (2000). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (Revised 4th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Date Created: 07/05/2007 See last Reviewed/Updated Date below.

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/pages/dsm-iv-tr-ptsd.asp>

Changes from 2013:

Highlights of changes to the APA diagnostic made in DSM-5, published in 2013, are found at <http://www.psych.org/practice/dsm/dsm5> and copied below:

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

DSM-5 criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder differ significantly from those in DSM-IV. As described previously for acute stress disorder, the stressor criterion (Criterion A) is more explicit with regard to how an individual experienced “traumatic” events. Also, Criterion A2 (subjective reaction) has been eliminated. Whereas there were three major symptom clusters in DSM-IV—reexperiencing, avoidance/numbing, and arousal—there are now four symptom clusters in DSM-5, because the avoidance/numbing cluster is divided into two distinct clusters: avoidance and persistent negative alterations in cognitions and mood. This latter category, which retains most of the DSM-IV numbing symptoms, also includes new or reconceptualized symptoms, such as persistent negative emotional states. The final cluster—alterations in arousal and reactivity—retains most of the DSM-IV arousal symptoms. It also includes irritable or aggressive behavior and reckless or self-destructive behavior. Posttraumatic stress disorder is now developmentally sensitive in that diagnostic thresholds have been lowered for children and adolescents. Furthermore, separate criteria have been added for children age 6 years or younger with this disorder.

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